

A Poetry of Remembrance:
A Study of Tatamkhulu Afrika's *Nine Lives*, *Dark Rider* and *Maqabane*

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Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts (English) at the University of Stellenbosch

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December 2002

STATEMENT

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

ABSTRACT

This thesis looks closely at three volumes of Tatamkhulu Afrika's poetry (*Nine Lives*, *Dark Rider* and *Maqabane*), to find that his work reflects a deep understanding of South African society and the different forces and conflicts inherent therein. I argue that although Afrika's poetry is presented as a recount of personal experience through the voice of a first person participant and observer, it is more than mere autobiography. This is because his poems resonate further (by means of vividly detailed descriptions, powerful metaphoric images and a mix of varied perspectives) to encompass not only his own life but also the lives and experience of many ordinary South Africans. In particular, his political poetry humanizes the abstractions of political discourse to show the impact that the greater political situation has had on the lives of ordinary South Africans.

I conclude by arguing that although Tatamkhulu Afrika's insights are filtered through a moral perspective based on his religious views and his belief in a basic humanity shared by all people, his work cannot be described as "traditionalist" as he constantly unsettles and recasts settled beliefs in an imaginary way.

OPSOMMING

Hierdie thesis bestudeer drie van Tatamkhulu Afrika se digbundels (*Nine Lives*, *Dark Rider* en *Maqabane*) en vind dat sy werk 'n diep insig toon in die verskillende kragte en konflikte inherent in die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing. Ek voer aan dat, alhoewel Afrika se gedigte spreek van 'n herlewing van persoonlike ervaring deur 'n eerstepersoonsverteller, dit meer is as blote outobiografie. Dit is omdat die impak van sy gedigte verder uitkring (by wyse van helder gedetailleerde beskrywings, sterk metaforiese uitbeeldings en 'n mengsel van verskillende perspektiewe) om nie net sy eie lewe nie, maar ook die lewens en ervarings van ander Suid-Afrikaners uit te beeld. Dit is in besonder waar van sy politiese gedigte, waar hy die abstraksies van politieke diskoers humaniseer om te wys hoe die groter politieke situasie 'n impak gehad het op die lewens van gewone Suid-Afrikaners.

Ek sluit af deur voor te stel dat alhoewel Tatamkhulu Afrika se insigte gefilter is deur 'n morele perspektief gebaseer op sy godsdienstige oortuigings en sy geloof in 'n basiese menslikheid wat deur almal gedeel word, sy werk nie as "tradisionalisties" beskryf kan word nie, aangesien hy voortdurend geïkte tradisionele beskouings bevraagteken en op 'n verbeeldingryke wyse herskep.

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Introduction

The release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 was a watershed in South African history which heralded in an era of rapid change in political and intellectual life. During the first few years of the 1990s, the great majority of people living in this country experienced their first taste of freedom and, in spite of the fact that in many ways conditions remained as grim and murderous as ever, this set a process in motion which would, in time, lead to a complete renewal and a rethinking of most aspects of South African culture. At the time, the South African poetical scene was, to some extent, in as much of a crisis as the rest of the country. Not only were the avenues for publishing in particularly short supply (there were at best two or three literary journals prepared to give space to poetry while mainstream publishers were barely willing to put out a handful of collections a year), but, as Adam Schwartzman wryly puts it, “the legacies of so many old critical projects – those, for instance, of growing a western poetry in African soil, or of turning poetry *solely* into a weapon of struggle – weigh[ed]... like a nightmare on the consciousness of the living” (4).

During this time, however, a group of poets started to emerge who had “a purpose beyond the confines of both (on the one hand) the ungainly platitudes and sloganeering of a certain amount of previous political poetry, and (on the other) the sterile aestheticism and mimicking provincialism of a dated, predominantly Eurocentric liberal poetic tradition” (Sole, “Bird Hearts Taking Wing” 25). Eager to negate the various sets of exclusive and intolerant notions of what constitutes the poetic in South Africa, these poets wished to combine socio-political commitment with a concern for appropriate poetic style; they were eager to explore form and imagery and willing to borrow from a variety of traditions and styles. Tatamkhulu Afrika, whose first collection of poetry was published in 1991 (when he was seventy years of age), was one of this exciting new group of poets. Almost instantly recognized as one of the country’s most important poets, he quickly won respect and a modicum of fame, as well as several poetic prizes (among which were the Thomas Pringle Awards for 1991 and 1993, the CNA Debut Prize for

1991, the Olive Schreiner Prize for 1992 and the Sanlam Literary Award for 1994 and 2000).

When I first became aware of this poet, I was immediately struck, not only by the precision and deftness of Afrika's language, but also by his subject matter. His political poetry was exceptional for the way it "transpose[d] newspaper headlines and economic statistics into breathing suffering human beings" (Sole, "Bird Hearts" 27), and he moreover gave a startling and unforgettable voice to the "outcasts", the most marginalized and forgotten members of our society. Another exciting feature of his poetry was that it seemed to fall outside of the depressing but (as many believe) unavoidable "black and white" categorization so typical of the fractured and dissonant South African reality: although it is always clear where Afrika's sympathies lie, it is almost impossible to tell, from his poetry alone, whether this is a poet writing from a "black" (and radical) or "white" (and liberal) perspective. Eager to learn more about this enigmatic poet, I attempted to obtain some academic studies of his work, only to find that, almost ten years after he was first published, hardly anything existed on this subject. There were, happily, several reviews and newspaper articles available (many of which were excellent and to which this study is deeply indebted) and his work was also mentioned or briefly discussed in a number of articles in academic journals. In-depth and systematic academic studies of his poetry, however, seemed to be in rather short supply.

The aim of this thesis, then, is to rectify this situation (at least to a certain extent) by providing a fuller and more comprehensive study of Tatamkhulu Afrika's work. Unfortunately (as this is a mini-thesis) I was forced by considerations of space to narrow my focus to a discussion of his first three volumes of poetry only. Because Afrika has been so marvellously prolific over the last decade (he has to date published eight volumes of poetry and three works of fiction) it means that I leave out a great deal in this study. I believe, however, that these volumes are not only (to a great extent) representative of many of the main themes and concerns of his work,¹ but also of particular interest on account of being written during the difficult period of democratic transition in this country.

My focus throughout this study is on Afrika's work itself, that is to say, on "the words on the page" (to use a term associated with the school of "new criticism"). I try to go beyond a mere "close analysis" of Afrika's poetry, however, as I believe that although

... poems...decide for themselves how they are read... they do not appeal to readers in empty spaces. They are – among other things – intricate social interactions... the meanings of which are crafted out of lived realities that are the pre-condition of both their composition and – in a different way – of the reader's ability to engage with them. (Schwartzman 3)

As far as possible, I therefore try to place the poems in a social, historical or poetic context, or to discuss them within the framework of greater literary issues, both local and international. In the process I make use of a varied and divergent range of critical resources. More specifically, this study relies heavily on the critical writings of three poets (Czeslaw Milosz, Seamus Heaney and Jeremy Cronin), two writers (Njabulo Ndebele and Chinua Achebe), one philosopher (MM Bakhtin) and a whole range of academics. My focus, however, is textual rather than critical in the sense that I try to avoid forcing the material into a critical framework (or forcing a critical framework onto the material); where possible I quote considerable extracts from Afrika's texts in order to let the material speak for itself. And because of considerations of space, once again, this study is "comparative" only in the very broadest sense of the term: insofar as I do compare Afrika's work to that of other writers I have kept the discussion to general outlines rather than specific examples in order to keep this mini-thesis from simply becoming too long.

In a country where the population is as endlessly heterogeneous and (perhaps) irreconcilable as our own, one feels, at times, hesitant to speak of "South Africans" as a group – what Ndebele calls "the them-us polarity" (60) is simply too deeply ingrained into the very soul of our society. Where possible, however, I have tried to use inclusive terms ("South Africans", "we", "the people of this country", etc) in this thesis, rather than to employ the exclusive (but seen by many as, perhaps, more accurate) categorizations inherited from the apartheid state ("black people", "whites", "coloureds", etc). In doing

so I am not denying the very real divisions that existed (and, of course, still exist) in this country, but am trying to move away from our tragic and divisive heritage. In this, I believe, I am also following the generous example set by Tatamkhulu Afrika himself, who, in some of his best poems, suggests a tentative path through our divided society to an (in some sense still only imagined) common core.

Endnotes:

1. Due to a lack of space, there are some important themes in Afrika's work which are not discussed in this thesis: these include the poet's meditations on old age, his childhood memories, his religious poetry and his recollections of the Second World War.

“No place like home”: How to be here, completely, in Africa.

When one examines the history of South African English poetry and literary criticism, it is both astonishing and also rather moving to note how many poets and critics have been obsessed with being more than “merely” South African, with adhering to “universal” or at least “international” standards. For years, the South African literary establishment seems to have been obsessed with the need to keep pace with the “main stream of poetry in English” and to conform to “internationally established yardsticks”.¹ This kind of obsession, of course, is not unique to South African literary practice. The recurrent colonial desire to be metropolitan has been widely commented on in these “post-colonial” times, and even a widely perceived “international” literary giant such as T.S. Eliot – that most supreme advocate of the Universal Great Tradition – has recently been discussed in terms of the desire of the marginal to belong to the centre.² In part, no doubt, this phenomenon is probably an inevitable consequence of the fact that English is an old language and not ours alone. As South Africans we have witnessed how, as in countries and cultures elsewhere, English has changed and adapted itself to better suit conditions of life in this country, but as Kermode argues (in relation to American English), “it cannot, in the nature of the case, quite cut itself off from its roots, or quite disown membership in a larger community” (98).

And yet, to place the blame for this South African obsession with “the universal” on the international status of the English language alone, is to evade a deeper and more painful issue, namely a kind of cultural “inferiority complex” which many South Africans suffered from in the past (and which is still sometimes evident today).³ Once again this is not something unique to South Africa, nor is it merely a “symptom” of post-coloniality.⁴ The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, for instance, talks about the perceived “literary map of the world” as having several “blank

spots”, open white spaces, which could easily bear the inscription *Ubi Leones* (Where the lions are) (7). Milosz tells how, in his case, coming from one of these “blank spots” meant that one had to undergo a period of training in Paris in order to become familiar with the “universal ideas” of the time – the unspoken assumptions underlying such a practice being that French culture is universal, relevant to everyone, while the local culture is provincial, marginal, unimportant. This is how Milosz describes it in his poem “Bypassing Rue Descartes”:

I descended toward the Seine, shy, a traveler,
A young barbarian just come to the capital of the world.

We were many, from Jassy and Koloshvar, Wilno and
Bucharest
Saigon and Marakesh.
Ashamed to remember the customs of our homes,
About which nobody here should ever be told:
The clapping for servants, barefoot girls hurry in,
Dividing food with incantations,
Choral prayers recited by masters and household together.

I had left the cloudy provinces behind,
I entered the universal, dazzled and desiring.⁵

To a great extent it is this insidious and complex feeling of cultural inferiority which has lain beneath so much of South African literature and criticism in the past – a feeling (sometimes deeply hidden and denied) that “real” culture is elsewhere, that our country is a “blank spot” on the cultural map of the world that must be made acceptable to a perceived audience “overseas”. Dazzled and desiring, we looked to those faraway “great cultures”, yearning for the stability and continuity they seemed to offer. Ashamed to remember the customs of our homes, many of us tried to avoid the painful reality of living in a place where even the very concepts of “culture”, “civilization”, and “society” were radically unstable, created and re-created day by day.

It was only during the past few decades that South Africans really began to grasp the folly of rejecting the local – that which grows organically, slowly, and unpredictably with a flavour uniquely South African – in favour of a Eurocentric “universalism”. Together with the rest of the world we started to realize how relative, flawed and particularly *European* this “universality” really was, and together with all those marginal places, those provinces and “blank spots”, we found that our local reality was far more important than the dream we were dreaming about the Western Universal. This is how Chinua Achebe, writing from another “blank [African] spot”, describes this insight:

In the nature of things, the work of a Western writer is automatically informed by universality. It is only others who must strain to achieve it. So-and-so's work is universal, he has truly arrived! As though universality were some distant bend in the road which you may take if you travel far enough in the direction of Europe or America, if you put adequate distance between yourself and your home. (*Hopes and Impediments* 52)

While there were many attempts in South African English poetry to break away from its Eurocentric roots,⁶ the true revolt against the dictates of “the centre” were brought about by the so-called “Soweto poets”⁷ of the 1970s. Filled with a passionate Afrocentrism and inspired by the ideals of the Black Consciousness movement, they blasted onto the South African poetic scene, and opened the doors for a literary debate which would, in time, “break the hold the South African educational system had on art as ahistorical, usually Europeanized works of excellence” (Chapman, *South African Literatures* 339). Poets such as Mtshali, Serote, Sepamla, and Gwala, and critics such as Kirkwood, Hofmeyr and Cronin dragged our literary argument away from what Chapman calls “the comforting poles of Western debate” (*Literatures* 339) and into a space altogether more confusing and frightening and challenging. The realization started to dawn, in other words, that

...every literature must seek the things that belong unto its peace, must, in other words, speak of a particular place, evolve out of the necessities of its

history, past and current, and the aspirations and destinies of its people. (Achebe, *Hopes* 50)

And in spite of the bitter acrimony and painful divisions this “African revolution” caused in South African literary circles in the 1970s and 1980s, the South African literary establishment did slowly become convinced that the “aspirations and destiny” of the South African people and the local realities of this “particular place” were as worthy a subject of art and criticism as they had ever supposed those “universal ideas” and “international themes” to be.⁸ This is how Chapman puts it in an article published in 1990:

...we see a marked “South Africanness” in our poetry today... This can manifest itself overtly, in local accents and speech rhythms, but more significantly, South African poets... have gained an assurance that their own concerns are important... (“A Sense of Identity” 34)

All this would be little more than an interesting chapter in our literary history, if it were not for the fact that so many traces of this “internationalist folly” remain part of our reality today. At its worst it leads to a kind of poetry that is strangely soulless, suspended in an ahistorical and colourless vacuum, or an insipid, obsessive, and claustrophobic emphasis on “the personal” – thoughts and feelings deemed to be universal or timeless. These attempts at a neutral universality, of course, are doomed to fail, as, to quote Milosz again,

...we apprehend the human condition with pity and terror not in the abstract but always in relation to a given place and time, in one particular province, one particular country. (112)

Tatamkhulu Afrika is one of South Africa’s poets who understands this great truth in a way that seems natural, almost instinctive. Part of a new generation of South African poets who write about their local reality and concerns with passion and confidence, it is clear from his poetry that he looks to his own people rather than an imaginary “international” audience for approval. In Afrika’s case, his “one particular province” refers to Cape Town and its surrounding areas, and he

presents this place to us with an almost *startling* immediacy that can be compared to Walcott's Caribbean, Frost's rural New England, or Serote's Alexandra.

Like these poets, Afrika writes about his world from an insider's perspective, which means that the place he describes is light years removed from the happy, one-dimensional, trouble-free tourist destination that so many people still believe (want?) Cape Town to be. His poetry pulls us into this world, and through his eyes we observe a place both immensely familiar and shockingly strange. As a poet, Afrika has an almost legendary eye for detail as well as an unusual sense of honesty, so that his poetry exhibits "an uncompromising concern with the textures and conditions of life of those who inhabit the waste-lands and hidden margins of city life in Cape Town" (Sole, "Bird Hearts" 27). He rarely hides what is ugly or unpleasant, but, at the same time, his poetry shows a sensitivity towards beauty which has (in a disillusioned world obsessed with ugliness) become rare indeed – even among artists and poets. In his poems, these two qualities combine to create a world that is as complex and confusing as the Cape itself – alive with the energy of the city streets as well as the sterility of its wastelands; the heartbreaking poverty of the squatter camps and "townships" as well as the breathtaking beauty of the natural surroundings. Shenfeld describes this aspect of his poetry in the following way:

He is obviously a practised observer of everyday life and builds his poems, detail by painstaking detail. He records the black-and-white minutiae of his world to draw us into it, as into a photograph, where ugliness, wealth and poverty stand side by side. (7)

The poem "No Place Like Home" (*Nine Lives* 41) provides a good example of the way in which Afrika can bring his surroundings to life. In this poem, Tatamkhulu Afrika describes the funeral of a friend in a way that makes it clear why one critic has argued that "mercilessly observed details are the essence of [Afrika's] poetry" (Rumney 82). The texture of the world painted in this poem is so solid that the reader experiences a sensation that is almost physical. We feel both the chill and

weariness of the desolate scene *and* the freshness and beauty of a natural world just out of reach, so that the lasting impression is one of lives and potential wasted:

Pitted streets and refuse heaps,
a heedless goat munching greens,
cooking fires and a scratching fowl,
raw onions on a stall,
pink plastic-sheeted eating-place with fancy sign,
warm smiles, tired eyes,
hands lifting or backs turned
on a coffin carried all the way
the old, sad, biblical, Calvary way,
to this dumping ground for bones. (14-24)

The stark and unflinching realism of these lines forces the reader to confront a scene which many would usually prefer to ignore, but at the same time this is far more than mere reportage. What may, at first glance, look like a simple listing of random details, under closer inspection turns out to be a careful selection of powerful images which manages to evoke a whole atmosphere, a complete way of life. In one quick glance, we are presented with the institutionalized neglect (“Pitted streets and refuse heaps”), the meagreness of the people’s lives (“cooking fires”, “raw onions”), the sad aspirations (“fancy sign”), and the underlying tensions in the community between those who give the political salute and those who choose to ignore the procession (“hands lifted or backs turned away”). The desolation of the scene is almost overwhelming, and yet the moments of human warmth and dignity are also observed so that the tone of these lines becomes complex, difficult to define. A solemn symbolism (“old, sad, biblical, Calvary way”) stands side by side with an almost brutally cynical bleakness (“dumping ground for bones”), and in the small human vanity of the “pink...fancy sign” and the heedlessness of the “munching goat”, there is a sad kind of comedy that reminds one of Serote’s terrible “comic houses and people” in “City Johannesburg”.⁹

But in spite of the realistic nature of these details, one should be wary of reading this poem as a mere vivid description of a certain time and place. Afrika may have an eye for detail, but his gaze usually goes much deeper than the level of simple superficial observation. In the last stanza of the poem, what seems like the same kind of detailed description of place and scene is smoothly and naturally transformed into a series of powerful metaphoric images, so that the concept of “home” becomes something altogether more significant.

All around, tall bluegum trees
offer shelter and, in summer, shade,
give promise of a bird’s sweet song.
Here, the yellow torrent of rain
snakes between the melting graves,
and if I do not watch where I put my foot,
it will thrust right through
to some dead friend’s bones
and I will truly be home again. (32-40)

The surrealistic images in these lines are vivid and unexpectedly disturbing. In a seemingly effortless move, Afrika merges the local and the particular with the metaphorical and the abstract to touch on complicated philosophical issues: the fragility of the barrier between life and death, the natural cycles of destruction and renewal, the horror of death, and the possibility of release it offers. And it is precisely because these issues flow so “naturally” from what is known and experienced that they become more than mere abstractions, more than insipid poetical generalizations.

Whether Tatamkhulu Afrika writes about small local incidents or huge universal issues, in other words, his work is always grounded in a richly textured South African reality which is so convincing and believable that it inspires the reader to trust in his vision, his conclusions. This is true not only of the places, but also of the people that he writes about. The people in Afrika’s poetry range from working class families to “bergies”, from politicians to drug addicts, from police officers to freedom fighters. And it is precisely because this is a poetry that knows where it belongs, that grows organically from the rich South African soil,

that it is fertile enough to embrace everyone it finds there in a vision that is generous and amazingly inclusive. Afrika's poetic sense of belonging, however, does not mean that the culture or landscape portrayed in his poetry is at all secure, constant, or stable. The spaces he describes are usually deeply contested, the people mostly occupying their own world with difficulty and unease. Many critics have therefore remarked that the tragic, furtive corners of South Africa form the real subject of Afrika's poetry, the "unacknowledged spaces, or spaces rejected as filthy non-spaces" (Horn, "Spaces" 78), an "underworld of muggers, drug-dealers and bergies" (Klopper, "Review: *Dark Rider*" 59).

Such statements are correct, but only because these unacknowledged and unstable spaces, these unacknowledged and rejected people, are an inseparable part of the South African whole. In the poem "Hooligans" (*Dark Rider* 28), for instance, Afrika sketches a vivid portrait of a "trio of young hooligans" (3), sitting on the steps in front of the huge church on Greenmarket Square.¹⁰ This is one of those "schizophrenic" places so typical of South Africa – portrayed in tourist brochures as the heart of the city's glossy tourism and business district, and in the crime statistics as a dangerous place of violence and decay. In the wholeness of Afrika's vision, however, the two parts are inextricably linked to one another; the one cannot exist without the other. As Horn puts it, the "modern city produces derelicts as it produces rubbish: it throws away the containers of goods it has consumed with the same ease as it throws away men and women it has used to produce" ("Spaces" 79).¹¹ To give a true portrayal of this place one should therefore look at what has been discarded or scrapped in order to produce a certain social space, and Afrika does this by focusing on the *people*, rather than on the statistics or the hype.

Leaning against the baroque,
beautiful door,
dark-skinned nearest one,
crushed-grape-purple mouth
moist as the salacious eyes,
is telling tales, narrow hips
simulating coitus, intolerably taunting

the wyfie he repels.
Odd one out,
staring sullenly to one side
is suddenly dominant,
taking from the sheath
of his sock, a six-
inch broad-bladed knife,
spitting on it, polishing it
with his shirt-tail.
It is not a show,
cinema-induced macho pose;
critically aroused he would masturbate as he would urinate,
openly against a wall.
Proving it, he stands,
hurls the knife, thudding, into the door,
wrenches it out again, splintering the frail,
immaculate design.
He stares around,
dagga-yellowed eyes
blank as glass on backing stone,
but no one challenges him and he lies down, flat,
on the bottom step and sleeps,
instantly as any child.

The tableau holds me,
as it holds the square,
explosively in its thrall,
quietened trio now the eye
of their own storm;
wyfie luring pigeons closer
with low, encouraging cries,
feeding them spittle-moistened bread,
storyteller tracing lines
of copulative complexity
on unrecording stone.
Formidably respectable,
greyly suited men,
briefcases sandwiched to their sides,
lengthen their paces as they near,
turning faces firmly other way. (6-51)

Afrika portrays the people of this country in the same unflinching, unsentimental way that he portrays the landscape. His young troublemakers are dangerous, unpredictable, even repulsive. There is a real aversion in the speaker's tone at

times: the “crushed-grape-purple mouth” (9) and the “moist...salacious eyes” (10) of the first few lines signifying a rank over-ripeness, a “taunting” (12) and out-of-control sexuality which repels because it has more to do with hate and boredom than with love or even physicality. The wasteful idleness of these three is subtly underlined by the small detail of the “baroque/beautiful door” (67) against which one of them leans: the beauty, idealism and purpose of the craft that shaped the former contrasted against the purposelessness and hopeless world-weariness of the latter. At the same time, there is little sensationalism here; this is not a tabloid piece on the “problem of young criminals”. The speaker’s gaze is much colder, and also more honest than that. He looks at these people in all their shamelessness (“he would masturbate as he would urinate/openly, against a wall” [24-25]), their destructiveness (the pointless splintering of the “frail, immaculate design” on the door [28-29]), their dangerousness (“a six-inch broad-bladed knife” [19] kept in the “sheath” [17] of a sock) and he never blinks, never looks away in coy innocence or shocked horror. Instead, he tries to present the “*peopleness*” of these people to us in the same way that Cronin, in one of his poems, talks about trying to convey “the stoneness of these stones”.¹² Their humanity (although this word is laden with certain philosophical overtones not entirely appropriate here) is conveyed through subtle, unsentimental details. The young vandal falls asleep “instantly as any child” when he realizes that “no one challenges him” (35). The “wyfie”¹³ plays with the pigeons in a way which suggests that a certain innocence remains undamaged, and the storyteller of the poem’s first lines keeps himself busy with all the mysterious intensity that children have when they trace lines on the ground the world over. These “hooligans” are also merely young people, teenagers really, who are lost, completely lost. But Afrika has lived enough to know that the tragedy of their lives does not make them lovable, or simple objects of pity. The knife-owner’s sleep may be childlike but it is also drug-induced and the lines drawn by the third youngster have a “copulative complexity” (45) – the words carefully chosen to remind us of the less childlike, less innocent and “palatable” side of this young man.

These people are the waste products of our society, the dark underside of the glossy surface that most of us, like those “[f]ormidably respectable/greyly suited men” (47) choose to ignore because of fear, guilt, or a sense of helplessness. Like them we “lengthen our paces” (50) as we near the truth of what our society tries to conceal, we “turn...our faces the other way” (51) in order not to see, to become involved, to change our lives and thereby to change *their* lives. Afrika’s poetry, however, allows us to respond to these people in a different way. As Kloppe so expertly puts it:

In these poems the speaker as interlocutor positions himself between the imperiled streets and the comfortable suburbs, articulating not so much the dark other side of *their* lives as the dark other side of our lives.¹⁴ Through the speaker we regain our capacity for responsiveness and enter into a dialogue with our fears, aversions, and desires. (“Review: *Dark Rider*” 59)

This, however, does not mean that Afrika’s poetry supplies any simple answers or neat moral conclusions. His awareness of the complexities of our society is too deeply grounded in the realities of South African life to provide any easy reassurances. Therefore, in spite of the way in which this poem has forced us to look at what we would usually overlook, and thereby allowed us to see beyond “the problem” to the *people*, at the end of the poem this “trio of young hooligans” remains just beyond our understanding, our easy sympathy, our pity, and our control,

...so alien
they walk another world. (67-68)

Afrika’s poetry is exciting precisely because of this kind of restraint. In spite of his keen and precise talent for observation, he somehow seems never to control his subjects; one always has the feeling that he lets these people speak and act for themselves. Not only the poet’s own voice and point of view, but also the voices of his characters and the realities of *their* worlds are thus allowed to be heard. As

a result his poems could probably be described as “novelistic” or “dialogic” in the Bakhtinian sense: instead of trying to find a single voice in which to express a single worldview, Afrika revels in the variety and diversity he finds all around him.¹⁵ And because he never forces a unitary, finished off or undisputable meaning upon that which he portrays, the reader is presented with a living mix of varied and opposing voices which re-impresses upon one with great vividness the richness, the variety, the violence, and the complexity that is South African society.

In the strangely unsettling poem, “Death of a Bergie” (*Dark Rider* 16), for instance, Afrika tells of a couple of homeless and hopeless people; the nightmare of their lives and the strange kind of love they nonetheless share. Every week, the speaker gives the man a rand, and every weekend he looks away as he sees the man in a drunken paralysis surrounded by the “stench of meths and wine” (38). The speaker is quite honest about the revulsion he feels towards the kind of life they lead (“To think of sex between them was to crunch/ suddenly through a crust of normalcy/ into a sinkhole of the obscene” [14-17]), but he is nonetheless willing to concede that “there was morality of a kind” (17) in the relationship between the couple. This can clearly be read as an attempt by the speaker to place these people within some kind of framework that he can understand and respect, and perhaps also as an attempt by the poet to control his subjects, to make them conform to some standards of “normality” and “decency”. And yet this couple easily escapes this moral framework forced upon them – they remain irredeemably, mysteriously, “other”:

Feet in the gutter, bum
in dog or man-shit on the fouled curbstone,
eyes staring so fixedly, twisted round,
it was only the stench of meths and wine
that stopped me from thinking he was shaman again,
ridding the flesh of sickness and pain,
calling up the rain. (35-41)

Their very being, in fact, their solid, uncompromising *presence*, delivers a scathing comment on exactly the kind of “morality” which marginalizes and excludes those who are not “normal” or “decent” enough. One can therefore argue that two differing realities implicitly comment on each other in this poem, two different worldviews exist in dialogue with one another. The final stanza reads as follows:

Quite suddenly, he died:
I found his wife sitting alone,
uncharacteristically silent under the old clan-tree,
wondered if she was feeling anything at all,
knew some shame when she gave
a harsh, raw cry of unfeigned pain,
strangled as a cockerel trying to crow,
was turning away again when I heard her say,
with all the sinlessness of the street-wise child:
“Hajji, can I now have the rand?” (42-51)

The first few lines once again contain an implicit moral judgment. The speaker cannot help but wonder whether this woman experiences the same kind of pain that a “normal” widow would, whether the loss of such a flawed and damaged “husband” has the capacity to hurt someone as broken and “other” as this “wife”. The woman’s response, her “harsh, raw cry of unfeigned pain”, comments so starkly on this judgmental insensitivity that the speaker is moved, at least, to feel “some shame”. However, the poem does not end there; its conclusion is far from the simple moralistic lesson that the *speaker* wants to take from this experience (namely that we are all brothers and sisters under the skin, that we all experience the same kind of feelings and that we should be ashamed of ourselves when we dehumanize those who are “different”). Instead of tying up all the poem’s loose ends to convey a clear and authoritative humanistic “message”, Afrika ends the poem with the woman’s own words, and that one simple sentence subverts and challenges all that has gone before. Her request for her “inheritance”, conveyed in her own voice, brings the harsh realities of her life home to the reader in a way that all the sympathy and pity (and condescension) in the voice of the speaker could not. The shocking extent of her poverty, the cunning needed for her to

survive, her tough-mindedness and her curious innocence are all contained in a single sentence, together with an uncomfortable reminder to the speaker (and of course the reader) of his own responsibility for and complicity in this situation.

It is in this rather uncomfortable way that Afrika's poetry is a varied mix of opposing voices and realities, and because he does not attempt to subject the characters in his poems to his own viewpoint but allows them to comment on each other, the South Africa portrayed in Afrika's poetry is far from the fantasy of the "happy rainbow nation" that so many people would like South Africa to be. Afrika's country is harshly divided along the lines of wealth, race, and politics and these divided voices, cultures, and viewpoints are portrayed through finely observed and sometimes horribly upsetting details. The real racism still alive in this country, for instance, is subtly yet devastatingly evoked in the small simple act of a white woman, who turns "shuddering aside" (60) when she sees a black woman kissing the speaker "with lips wet as a bride's" (67) ("Remembering", *Maqabane* 69). This gesture is one of such unthinking, instinctive, revulsion and contempt that it is at least as disturbing as the more vocal and overt "reverse racism" shown by a black man in the poem "Pas de Trois" (*Dark Rider* 36), who leeringly tells a boy (innocently flirting with a black girl) that "there's nothing like a black cunt's fuck" (50).

In this dynamic and changing society, "meaning" is difficult to pin down; the significance of words and actions is mostly contested, plural, and provisional. Violence and distrust bubble below the surface of this uncertain society, and signs are always open to (mis)interpretation. In the poem "Girl Alone" (*Maqabane* 47), the speaker sees a girl walking alone in a deserted area. There is both weariness and concern in his tone when he remarks that

Six-times-stabbed I know
this is no place for a white
woman walking alone (33-35)

but when he crosses over to the woman's side of the road in order to lend her the protection of his presence, she panics and runs away terrified – a kind gesture is read as a threatening, potentially violent act. The culture of violence makes suspects of all of us, or, even worse, it changes us into perpetrators of violence ourselves. In "The Thief" (*Maqabane* 29-32), the terrified speaker of the poem finds himself ready to attack an intruder, when, bread-knife in hand, he asks himself:

Could I use it,
plunge it into breast or throat
feel his warm blood rush
out over my hands? (36-39)

When the intruder subsequently flees the speaker only catches a glimpse of

...torn
white tackies, split
pants bar[ing] a brown
vulnerable bum (101-104),

and the defenseless humanity thus signified leaves the speaker with a confused sense of shame and horror: attacker becomes victim, and act of defence becomes an act of aggression.

And yet, for all the violence and distrust, the divisions and inequalities, South Africa is also a place of amazing beauty and hope. This too forms a part of Tatamkhulu Afrika's portrayal of his country, and he finds optimism, faith, and a shared humanity in the most unlikely of places. In "The Woman at the Till" (*Nine Lives* 28) a woman who the speaker at first "reads" as a sullen and racist "maboer" (i.e. white Afrikaner) is transformed into a symbol of the fragile possibilities alive in this country by the wonderful kind of "African" exuberance signified by her colourful blouse. A similar kind of transformation takes place in the poem "Rasta" (*Nine Lives* 16-17). Here Africa sees a "little Rastafarian/ playing for pennies and life" (24-25) transformed into an almost godlike figure by his amazing musical skill, his music likened to:

...the thin wild rhythms of a Pan or Tokolosh,
growing their own glades, swelling their own streams
in the desolate bricklands of a central city mall. (40-42)

Keats's famous Grecian Urn declared that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"¹⁶ and while this haunting paradox makes sense in the context of Keats' poem, too many of us have found the opposite to be true: that beauty often hides truth, that truth is often horribly, disturbingly ugly. A great deal of the poetry written in the twentieth century therefore rejected the Romantic praise of beauty in order to disturb the complacency of a sheltered bourgeois readership. Wilfred Owen's poetry (to take but one example) for instance used "the linguistic sensuousness he learned from Keats in order to subvert Keats's famous dictum" (Campbell 205): rather than visions of beauty, Owen gave us visions of horror that, because they were *horrible*, had to be true. The truth Afrika creates and conveys in a poem like "Rasta", however, is one that encompasses both beauty and ugliness: the "wild rhythms of a Pan" *and* the "desolate bricklands" of a "city mall". It is a beauty, in other words, that exists in the *presence* of ugliness and it is all the more true because of this. It is this kind of "double vision", the ability to reflect a reality which is various rather than unitary, filled with a multitude of conflicting perspectives and opposing points of view that makes Afrika's poetry so exceptional. He writes about his country, its places, and its people, in a way that never overlooks the concrete (the messy, shattered, constantly changing local reality) in favour of the abstract (that safe space where the "universal" – beauty, art and truth – still remain static and undamaged). And because of this integrity, because he discusses the human condition not in the abstract but in relation to his particular country, his particular province, the "universal issues" he writes about – poverty and death, love and friendship, loneliness and beauty – gain an authority and a persuasiveness that are quite rare indeed.

At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed the obsession that so many South African artists have with producing works of international rather than mere local importance within the ambit of a kind of "cultural inferiority complex". It is important to realize, however, that the desire for an art that is "universal" has its basis in an aesthetic as well as a cultural anxiety. There seems to be a whole

school of South African poets and critics who believe that “Art” should not be tainted by the mere concerns of ordinary people – politics and poverty, crime and crisis, society and science – but that it should be elevated above the ugly and confusing worldly sphere. The longing, in other words, is for “pure poetry”,¹⁷ for art as transcendence, for a craft so pure in itself that it could be appreciated for its sheer beauty or skill alone, whatever one’s views on the messy chaos which constitutes our immediate reality. At its heart, there is a desire to elevate art so high as to remove it from the fray of our everyday lives and to glorify it as a thing unto itself: art for the sake of art alone. A poem becomes an entity removed from its historical and ideological context – “an aesthetic object made of words” (Bennet and Royle 11).

Bakhtin, for one, is harshly critical of this kind of poetry. He argues that the social diversity inherent in human speech is erased in the search for a special poetic language; that an art thus created becomes “monologic” and runs the risk of finding itself on the side of the “official” discourses of state and power.

The language of poetic genres... becomes authoritarian ... sealing itself off from the influence of extraliterary social dialects. Therefore such ideas as a special “poetic language”, a “language of the gods”, a “priestly language of poetry” and so forth could flourish on poetic soil... Social languages are filled with specific objects, typical, socially localized and limited, while the artificially created language of poetry is directly intentional, indisputable, unitary, and singular.¹⁸

Not only is such poetry thus potentially authoritarian and repressive, but the quest for a pure art (and the resulting over-emphasis on the importance of form and craftsmanship) can also lead poets to write an “ornamental” poetry that is graceful, even beautiful, but ultimately irrelevant to their audience because it does not reflect the reality of people’s lives.

Milosz takes this belief in a “pure art” right back to its roots in classicism, where the material was already ordered and universally accepted, and the poet’s only

work was to focus on shaping the language. The audience expects no surprises from the poet; it knows the “story” (Helen and Troy, Odysseus and Penelope, Cassandra and Apollo, and so forth) backwards. All the audience expects from the poet is a demonstration of good poetic craft.

A given topic, and topoi polished by long use like pebbles in a stream: that’s what both fascinates and irritates 20th century poets. For us classicism is a paradise lost, for it implies a community of beliefs and feeling which unite poet and audience... Perhaps there is a good craftsman concealed in every poet who dreams of a material... universally accepted: what remains is then to work on chiseling the language. Were classicism only a thing of the past none of this would merit attention. In fact, it constantly returns as a temptation to surrender to merely graceful writing. (65)

If one looks back over the great debate that raged in the 80s between poets and critics in South Africa, this quarrel between classicism and realism seems to be as relevant today as it ever was. In Cronin’s landmark paper of the mid 1980s, “Ideology and Literary Studies in South Africa”, for instance, he argues that the South African literary establishment has for far too long been caught between the sterile poles of “content” *versus* “form”, “the particular” *versus* “the universal”, “the topical” *versus* “the timeless”, etc. At the extremes of these opposite poles he quotes, inter alia, Mtshali, who makes stylistic features sound like “a hedonistic luxury akin to caviar” (10), and Guy Butler, who sounds positively evangelical about the merits of “Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury*” (11).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, it took a long time for the South African establishment to realize that the allegedly universal is often more culturally and ideologically specific than they had liked to believe, and that “the aesthetic ideal” often hid a horrible reality from society’s view. The truth, of course, is that even the writers and poets of the Great Tradition were never “pure”. They did not limit their art to a constricted, narrow territory, did not leave ordinary people to deal with the chaos of ordinary reality alone. In art as in life, in other words, what is

extraordinary, exquisite and sacred has always been hopelessly mixed with what is ordinary, unsightly, or even profane – as Flaubert once (rather prosaically) put it to Turgenev: “I have always tried to live in an ivory tower, but a tide of shit is beating its walls, threatening to undermine it”.¹⁹

There are few, if any, places left on earth where people share an unquestioning “community of beliefs and feeling”, and wherever this is not the case, the content of the poetry can never be uncontested, universally accepted. Thus, content becomes as important as form, and that which is particular, topical, and local can only be ignored at the risk of creating art that is ultimately meaningless. This means that every poet when writing is making a choice between the prescriptions of an aesthetic “poetic” language and the need to write something that is relevant and real.

If I cross out a word and replace it with another, because in that way the line as a whole acquires more conciseness, I follow the practice of the classics. If, however, I cross out a word because it does not convey an observed detail, I lean towards realism. Yet those two operations cannot be neatly separated, they are interlocked. (Milosz 71)

Tatamkhulu Afrika, as we have seen, takes his subject matter from the local reality of South African life, and the content of his work is almost always burningly, uncomfortably, politically and socially “relevant”. There are, however, those critics who have criticized the *form* of his work, arguing that his poetic skill and technical artistry are fatally flawed. The most serious criticism leveled against Afrika’s work is probably that his poetry suffers from overkill, that, at times, he doesn’t know when to stop and ends up saying too much. Kozain, for instance, accuses Afrika of “writerly excess” (77), of not working hard enough to find the “most concentrated form of expression” (80) and of “over-writing and sloppy revision” (76). Strauss, similarly, talks about the poetry’s “sprawl” and argues that Afrika is “not fastidious enough”, that he “doesn’t hold the right things in reserve” (58).

There have also been those who have defended Afrika's work against this kind of criticism: Kloppe, for instance, has answered such criticisms by arguing that "Tatamkhulu is romantic and expansive... closer to Guy Butler than Dennis Brutus" ("The Art of Poise" 88). While I agree with the latter opinion, I do not believe that it completely answers the above-mentioned criticism. The truth, I think, is that there are times when Afrika does seem to put his trust too much in words, rather than silence, to convey his meaning.²⁰

The otherwise wonderful poem "Slave Band" (*Nine Lives* 18), for instance, tells of a small musical group, a "two man pseudo tribal band" (2), that usually performs in a lacklustre way, selling their music and their "tribalism" for "a scattering of small coins" (30). One day, however, they start to perform "for themselves alone/ from some deep need within the bone" (31-32), and their act is transformed into a thing of such beauty that it leaves the narrator stunned.

I wouldn't have dared to give a coin,
I wouldn't have dared to give the world:
strange gods whispering in wild wetlands,
red dunes rising against a wild sky,
filled the small prim city square,
covered over its cold stone
and old oxskins over tracksuits swayed
through the singing grasses of the African plain. (41-48)

The word "dared" in the first two lines is such a perfect choice, indicating a sudden awe, respect, even a kind of fear, and the subsequent imagery so evocative and powerful, that one is left to wonder whether the last four lines of the poem are really necessary:

Drums, xylophones, and kudu horn,
two spent players playing for a pence
in a desolate city square,
none of these any longer were for sale... (49-50)

These last few lines add little to the meaning of the poem, in fact, they spell out a point made far more subtly in the previous lines, and this causes the poem to lose much of its originality and power (the final ellipsis being particularly overdone).

Poems such as “The Funeral” (*Maqabane* 71) and “The Squatter” (*Maqabane* 5) show the same kind of difficulty – in spite of wonderful moments these poems tend to repeat gestures already made, and could probably have done with more careful editing.

Afrika’s language has also been criticized as “clichéd” and “too easily come by” (Strauss 59), and when, in “Last Lament of a Tribalist”, he describes the streets of the old District Six as “mediaeval, cobbled alleys winding past/ derelict dramatic doors” (*Nine Lives* 32-33), or talks about “rummaging through the antiquities of my ephemeral days” (“Lines to a Jailed Friend”, *Nine Lives* 64-65) one does feel that such criticism may have some merit. I am convinced, however, that in Afrika’s work such lapses are the exception rather than the rule, and that far from being “sentimental” his poetry generally exhibits an intellectual rigour and honesty that are quite remarkable. The same can be said of his use of imagery, which, apart from the odd exception,²¹ is usually marvellously fitting and well thought-out.

No poet’s oeuvre, of course, can ever be perfect, and poetry will be criticized as long as there are critics. Overall, however, I believe that Afrika’s work shows a fine poetic artistry which belies the simplistic divide between content and craftsmanship, “international standards” and local values. Afrika explains his own viewpoint on this issue in a characteristically down-to-earth way:

If we’re going to write poetry now, it must be good poetry. That of course is an old theme between the classicists and the new guys. I’m halfway between the two. (Berold 39)

A poem that clearly illustrates what Tatamkhulu Afrika means when he says that he is “halfway between the two” is the prize-winning “The Funeral of Anton Fransch” (*Dark Rider* 100).²²

This powerful elegy deals with a small, specifically local, and politically “real” event: the funeral of a hero (and a victim) of the struggle for political freedom in

South Africa. Once again, the poem's most obvious strength lies in the sane and unemphatic honesty with which the meticulously observed details are presented. The minor community leader, "well fleshed beneath the robes of his unaccustomed Arabism" (14), the advocate with his "customary shrewdness" (26), the "four round housewives of Bonteheuwel" (39) and the teenagers with their "incontinent passion" (52) all take on a persuasive reality – as actual people inhabiting actual, identifiable contexts. And yet, from these precise descriptions and close observations the poem evolves slowly and unspectacularly to a point where it addresses the big issues, or, if you will, the "universal questions": the cost of an ideal; the possibility of futility; the need to remember the dead; and the need to keep on living.

A great part of the "craftsmanship" of poetry has to do not only with choosing the correct word, but also with manipulating the silences. In this poem Afrika silences those critics who would accuse him of excess – the first stanza simply *resounds* with what is not said:

I went to Anton Fransch's funeral:
he held off the police for seven hours (1-2)

The implications of the chilling second line are left to our imaginations; it becomes *our* burden not to connect it too graphically in our imaginations with the gruesome violence of the image in the second stanza:

...a buffalo being dragged down by hyenas,
one eye ripped out, the bloodied muzzle
agape and bellowing. (9-11)

On one level, this poem is almost cruelly satirical. There is, for instance, an awareness of the way in which even the noblest sentiments can be cynically manipulated in the harsh description of the advocate, who in his speech "targets"

...not the dead son but the still living, disposable
mother,
persuading from me one reluctant teardrop. (30-32)

In a similar manner the potentially moving symbolism of the way in which the people “held the flag up with both ... hands” (33) after the police had taken the staff, is abruptly undercut by the way in which the housewives use it as a “sunshade” during the march. And after Afrika’s portrayal of the children’s disillusioned puberty, their “rapacious rather than radiant”(51) eyes, their anger and hatred (evoked in the seventh stanza) are simply sad and human rather than inspiring or particularly brave.

The satire, however, rather than distancing us from the events, evokes the scene with such a cold and desperate clarity that the reader is left almost defenceless when confronted with the moments of sadness and suppressed horror that also run through the poem. The unexpectedly lyrical sections in the fourth and seventh stanzas catch us unprepared; by this time we, like the mourners in the poem, have also almost forgotten about:

the handful of flesh and bone and sinew
that for seven improbable hours challenged
all the paraphernalia of power, shaming
them and us
equally. (62-67)

In the eighth stanza, Afrika’s humanity and compassion soften the harsh picture painted earlier in a way that is remarkably unsentimental. Because the questions he asks are so simple, they are the big ones. How can mere words challenge the brutality of naked power? Can our hatred of injustice protect us from our own “inadequacy” (73), our unwillingness to fight against what we believe cannot be conquered? How do we remain human, when surrounded by so much evil?

The poem ends in a mood of melancholy disillusionment, as well as what Barris calls “a terribly impersonal irony” (11). And yet there is an almost ceremonious beauty too, and a strange kind of comfort based on an awareness of the insignificance of human life in comparison to an eternal, natural universe:

Anton Franch was a very heavy hero:
I think, sometimes, we dropped him along the road some-

where,
and he lies there still, in the seeding grasses,
the bright, blue moonlight,
and only the beetles, swarming,
bury him. (78-85)

The quiet desolation described here, the eerie beauty of an unfathomable reality far removed from the small human sphere, contrasts so sharply with the frantic bustle, the pettiness and the desperation of the human activity depicted earlier in the poem, that it is easy to forget that they are both sides of the same coin, that what is provisional and human and local exists uneasily together with what is huge, and absolute and universal. This is not a truth, however, that Tatamkhulu Afrika ever forgets, and while his poetry is thus unashamedly “local” in its concerns it also shows a deep “universal” awareness – not of cultural standards set by others, elsewhere – but of a bigger reality against which all human endeavour, whether artistic, political or social, must ultimately seem provisional, limited, humble.

Endnotes:

1. These quotations are taken from such august figures as Guy Butler and Douglas Livingstone respectively (as quoted in Cronin [11] and Klopfer [“ Ideology” 290]).
2. See Kermode (97-105).
3. See, for instance, Stephen Watson (“Poetry in South Africa Today” 14), where he refers to South Africa as a “largely provincial backwater” and bemoans the fact that for South African poets “there are no equivalents of Guggenheim foundation awards, no Yadda corporations, MFA’s in creative writing, writer’s workshops ... and so forth”. See also Skinner’s patronizing review of the collection *Essential Things* where he dismisses the work of twenty-three new voices on the basis of an unproblematic recourse to (seemingly uncontested and universal) “critical standards”, “common sense” and “history’s judgements” (179).

4. Admittedly, this phenomenon has recently received a lot of attention in the field of post-colonial criticism. See, for instance, Chinua Achebe: "Perhaps they were... responding to... something inside themselves – a deeply damaged sense of self... An erosion of self-esteem is one of the commonest symptoms of dispossession" (*Home and Exile* 81).
5. As quoted in Milosz (8).
6. Chapman, for instance, identifies the main theme in "white" English poetry from Cullinan back to Pringle as "how to be here, completely in Africa" (*Literatures* 340) – hence the title of this chapter.
7. This term was inaugurated by Michael Chapman in his 1982 book, *Soweto Poetry*. It has since been severely criticized for its inaccuracy as well as for being a kind of "ghettoisation". In his unpublished MA thesis, Vukani Mde criticizes this term in the following way:

To my limited knowledge, there has not been any popular reference to "Sandton poetry", even as commonalities of idiom within much of middle-class, white suburban poetry are acknowledged. This is undoubtedly the result of an intellectual arrogance which sees anything black or relating to blacks as somehow outside the mainstream – and this, disturbingly, in a country whose population is 90% black. (70)

Whenever I therefore use this term in my thesis, I try to highlight the problems surrounding its use by placing the term in inverted commas.
8. This change in perspective, needless to say, was narrowly linked to greater political, social and academic shifts of power in South Africa.
9. From "City Johannesburg" (*Yakhal' inkomo*. Johannesburg: Renoster, 1972).
10. Afrika never actually names this place in the poem, but given the description it is unlikely to be anywhere else.
11. Klopper also makes this point in his review of *Dark Rider*.
12. From "To learn how to speak" (Gray 365).
13. "Wyfie" is prison slang for a young man used for sexual pleasure by other inmates.

14. The reference is to the section in *Dark Rider* called "...the dark other side of their lives..." (11).
15. Bakhtin argued that certain kinds of writing could accommodate the inherently dialogic nature of language better than others. He viewed the "canonized" genres – epic, lyric, and tragedy – as seeking to express a single style, a single voice, a single (authoritative) worldview. These genres were thus classified as *monologic*, and because they erase all traces of social diversity; he argued that they could easily find themselves on the side of the official discourses of state and power. In contrast, Bakhtin saw the novel as a genre which lends itself to the dialogic as it is capable of reflecting the rich varieties of human speech, of differing worldviews and ideologies. It is nonrepressive and (potentially) liberating, and he therefore saw this genre as ethically and socio-politically important as it has the potential to subvert the authority of the discourses of power. As Michael Eskin points out, however, Bakhtin's endorsement of literary prose and his concomitant critique of poetry is polemical and functional rather than essentializing – after all, Bakhtin did admit that novels can be monologic and that poems can be "novelistic" (380). Eskin, in fact, deconstructs the familiar poetic/novelistic opposition of Bakhtinian criticism to conclude that poetry may plausibly be constructed as *the* dialogically and socio-politically exemplary mode of discourse in Bakhtin's writings.
16. From "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (discussed in Schmidt 465 – 468).
17. This is a term used by Milosz (28-37).
18. As quoted in Eskin (384).
19. As quoted in Gordimer (6).
20. That Afrika himself is aware of this potential weakness in his poetry is clear from the following quote: "I sent some of it [his poetry] to Douglas Reid Skinner and ... he said "I'll give you a few tips – when you want to stop saying something, put down a full stop, don't carry on and on. And stop telling the reader what to think ... let them think for themselves." (Berold 35)

21. See, for instance, "Frightened Man" (Dark Rider 25) where he describes a gang of murderers in this rather overblown and inappropriately romantic way:

The huntsmen came down then:
long-necked and javelin-limbed
flowing like symphonies
of ravening birds.(18-21)

21. In 1991 Afrika won the Sydney Clouts Memorial Prize for this poem.

“Part of the landscape of their lives”: Uniting the “public” and the “private” spheres

Poetry, like music, is an art of rhythm and sound, but it is also an act of language and meaning and, as such, it has the inherent capacity to become part of the dialogue of our lives. In other words, as an act of *language*, poetry can help to establish communication between people, taking us out of our isolation and helping us to see ourselves in relation to others. At its best, in the words of Seamus Heaney, “it unites reader and poet and poem in an experience of enlargement, of getting beyond the confines of the first person singular, of widening the lens of receptivity until it reaches and is reached by a world beyond the self” (149). Why then, may we ask, is poetry so often seen as esoteric, elitist, purely individualistic, and inaccessible?

From a broad historical viewpoint, it would seem that it was mainly during the 19th century that Europe saw a separation of the artistic and public spheres. In the case of poetry, this meant that, instead of a social act of communication, an accessible and explicable *sharing* of thought and experience, poetry became (to a great extent) an aesthetic and nearly always individualistic pursuit. Cronin argues that certain material processes (such as the Industrial Revolution) removed the European poet from an immediate community and from “previously occupied well-defined social positions” to become an “idealized general person, ‘Poet’” (22). This move was closely linked to what Cronin calls the “excessive and one-sided fetishisation of form” (22), and what is referred to as the ideal of “Pure Poetry” elsewhere in this study.¹ Moreover, during this time the Romantic view of the poet started to dominate, which posited (at its most extreme) the idea of the poet as hero: “a solitary wanderer in the shadow-land of emotion who, because of his or her superior imagination and quality of feeling, is best able to chart the landscape of the heart” (Dobyns 205). Consequently, the function of the reader

also became more limited – to “applaud” the poem, rather than to find his or her life reflected within the lines.

Milosz looks at the literary history of France as a general model for what happened in Europe, and argues that the death of religion, the victory of positivism and “the scientific Weltanschauung” (18) led to this separation between art and public. “Bohemian” poets began to believe that the values still professed by the average citizen, “the bourgeoisie” were already dead, “that its foundation, religion, had been hollowed out from the inside and that art was going to take over its function and become the only dwelling place of the sacred” (18). This led to what Milosz calls the divide between “Poets and the Human Family”:

...on one side those who earn and spend, with their cult of work, their religion and patriotism, and, on the other, the bohemians whose religion is art and whose morality is the negation of values recognized by the other camp. (27)

The ultimate consequence of this divide between poetry and public was that the western poet became, in many ways, an alien, an asocial individual submerged in an elite art form, while “the masses” were left with a “low” art that was thematic, sentimental and melodramatic. The artist became a figure of suspicion if not hostility, so that someone like Chinua Achebe, writing from a non-western perspective, could say the following:

We have learnt from Europe that a writer or an artist lives on the fringe of society – wearing a beard and a peculiar dress and generally behaving in a strange, unpredictable way... The last thing society would dream of doing is to put him in charge of anything.
(*Hopes and Impediments* 27)

Much has been written on this matter, and much more will no doubt be written in future, but a full discussion of this phenomenon is far beyond the scope of this chapter. The only thing that need concern us at this point is the impact that this “divide” has had on South African theory and practice.

When the “Soweto poets”, referred to in the previous chapter, came to prominence in the 1970s, the South African literary establishment did not, at first, quite know how to deal with them. Their work, no doubt, was of considerable political and social relevance, but was it truly “art”? These poems, with their disregard of correct grammar and syntax, their ghettoisms and profanities, their emotive naming and their political urgency, were miles removed from the “high” European ideal of art discussed above. Moreover, and perhaps even more threateningly, the role played by these poets was radically different from what most critics (with their conventional Western literary assumptions and expectations) had come to expect.² Instead of being asocial individuals searching for personal space and fulfillment, these poets were, in the words of Ezekiel Mphahlele, “the sensitive point[s] of [their] communit[ies]”.³ Committed to political and social justice and deeply concerned about both the subjective *and* the communal, these “new” black poets were, as Mutloatse put it, “in search of our true selves – undergoing self-discovery *as a people*”.⁴ Suddenly the established canon of South African English poetry (consisting almost exclusively of texts written by white males) started to seem disturbingly self-indulgent and even irrelevant in view of the harsh and overwhelming South African realities. And yet, did these poems, so long the staple of academic and critical studies, not also have a marvellous force and beauty of their own? How could two such very different kinds of poetry be incorporated into one critical framework?

In order to accommodate this “new” kind of poetry, many South African critics fell back on certain perceived notions about the differences between African and Western art. (In South Africa, of course, there had been an established tradition of oral poetry long before this country was colonized, and because all these “new” poets were black they could be seen as part of this older, purely “African” tradition, in spite of the fact that they were writing in English.) It was argued that traditional African art has always been very closely linked to the life of the community – in contrast to the European position discussed above, it was communal rather than individualistic and focused on “public” rather than

“private” matters. The *imbongi*, for instance, had a well-defined social function as “inspired articulator of the collective values of the community” (Cronin 22). On the basis of this distinction between African and Western art, the strange critical notion thus started to develop “which held black poets... to be largely PUBLIC in their concerns [and] the white poets ... to be PRIVATE”(Cronin 16) – this, despite the fact that most of the “new” black poets were urbanized, writing in English, and that their poetry was a hybrid mixture of African and Western influences.

Several critics have since pointed out (and rightly so) just how false and misleading this kind of simplistic, “black and white” division really is, and it is unnecessary to repeat their arguments here.⁵ However, insofar as such a categorization makes a difference between poetry that is “public” (a communicative act which focuses on the world beyond the self, one that is accessible, socially relevant and gives shape to the thoughts and aspirations of the community) and poetry that is “private” (an aesthetic act which focuses on subjective experience rather than on social issues and which has Art rather than communication as its ultimate goal), it is, in fact, rather useful when examining a great deal of modern poetry. This is because poetry is today fighting for its very soul, for its place in the world and its right to exist. In a world where “high” art is deeply discredited and “low” art can be found on cereal packets, every poet, of whatever race, colour or creed, must find a balance between how “public” or “private” his or her work will be – and this, as we shall see, is hardly a simple or an easy decision to make.

Over the past century or so, we have witnessed how the western poet’s over-emphasis on “the private” has caused poetry to suffer an “impoverishment and a narrowing” (Milosz 26), because it withdrew from the dialogue of ordinary people’s lives into a closed circle of subjectivism. In the process, it lost most of its audience to the more “public”, accessible, and communicative art forms such as film, novels, and television. Poetry became a thing apart, which is why every

poet (or lover of poetry) knows what Milosz talks about when he discusses “the poet’s anxiety”:

... the anxiety that has seized them every time they have encountered the man on the street: at such moments they have sensed their own refinement, their “culture”, which has made them incomprehensible... thus they have felt potentially subject to the mockery of the common man. (31)

On the other hand, we have also seen how limiting and unsatisfactory it can be to use poetry as a kind of “public” tool.⁶ Why write a poem when a pamphlet will do? Similarly, most poets’ attempts to ingratiate themselves with the public by “lowering poetry to their level” have been spectacularly unsuccessful – with the exception perhaps of the modern pop song, that happy marriage between music and “poetry lite”.

Tatamkhulu Afrika’s work throws an interesting light on this debate, I believe, because, like the best kinds of “committed poetry”, it shows how one can be a “poet of the people”⁷ without merely conforming to the taste of the majority. Like the American poet Walt Whitman, Afrika is “no stander above men and women, nor apart from them”,⁸ but unlike Whitman, he has none of that “grand narcissism”,⁹ where to look at the world is to look at oneself, to love the world to love oneself. The position Afrika speaks from is as one of the crowd, without airs, without distance, and without any claims to a “superior imagination” or “quality of feeling”. And yet, in many ways he is a lyrical poet, even though he does not have the lyrical poet’s “momentarily exaggerated sense of his own consciousness as focus in a world arranging itself in concentric circles around him in order to be known” (Strauss 57). Afrika’s poetry is lyrical in the sense that it focuses on an incident or experienced moment filtered through his own consciousness – but with little of the insistent subjectivity (and sometimes idiosyncratic perspectives on reality) which one often encounters when reading such poetry.

In the poem “Dancing in My City” (*Dark Rider* 55), for instance, Afrika tells of a protest march during the apartheid years. The speaker has intense feelings of alienation, fear, hatred, and even inferiority, when he suddenly sees an old woman dancing in front of him.

But then I see her:
the little yellow, dancing woman,
the rapt yet graven,
shrivelled features,
generous San buttocks rolling
with a gentle, rhythmic, effortless abandon,
small feet skittering,
lightly as a water bug on dust-glazed water
along the crowd-crushed, dead macadam.

And my feet move on again, knowing
that under them,
lies still a soil forever Africa,
and it is not I that am the alien,
but they that stand here, streetside,
watching me
dancing in my city. (48-62)

In this poem, we are aware of a subjective “self” observing and thinking, with the power to transform imaginatively what he sees, and yet this visualizing self is not elevated above or separate from those he observes; he speaks as one of the protesters, marches with them, dances with them. Through his eyes the woman’s simple dance is transformed into an illuminating moment of pure beauty which restores the speaker’s own sense of belonging, as well as his faith in the power and resilience of Africa’s people. This transformation, however, is far from fantastic, imaginary, or fanciful. The woman is hardly idealized: she is “little”, “yellow” and “shrivelled”, and the image of her as a “water bug” skittering on “dust-glazed water” suggests grace, strength, and fragility in a way that is decidedly unexaggerated and down-to-earth. These insights, needless to say, are subjective and deeply personal, but, when given shape in the form of the poem, they become an offering, a gift to the reader, a sharing of thought and experience which enables us to join in this joyous dance of belonging. The first person voice,

the subjective “self” of the poem, is thus engaged in a communicative act which strives to *include* the reader – it is not the poet’s journey of discovery but our *own* which becomes important.

In “Dancing in My City”, then, it is the first person voice which allows us to enter and share in the poem, the speaker’s consciousness becoming our consciousness. This device – a deeply convincing recount of experience conveyed through the voice of a first person observer and participant – is a feature of all of Afrika’s poetry, a feature so important that his work is often viewed as almost completely autobiographical. Peter Horn, for instance, describes Afrika’s poetry in the following way:

What is so convincing about his poetry is that it does not attempt to appear more than it is: the voice of a human being, who has been involved in the struggle which we all know, and who has observed and described incidents and people in this life he has lived... (“Spaces” 81)

Similarly, the publisher’s blurb on the jacket of *Nine Lives* proclaims that the collection covers “an often harrowing lifetime, from earliest childhood to orphanage and war, to middle-age, politics, prison and later years”, while the cover of *Dark Rider* proclaims that Afrika “has touched and smelled...[the people in his poems] ...and looked them in the eyes”.

While it is indeed often difficult, when reading Afrika’s poems, to separate the poet from the speaker, the creator from the creation, I believe that one should be careful of too quickly categorizing Tatamkhulu Afrika’s work as simply “autobiographical”, the story of a person’s life told in verse. That said, it is of course true that all poetry is “autobiographical” in some way or another. Poets may distort, lie, or invent experiences, but they have only their own lives, wisdom, and experience to share.¹⁰ However, to see Afrika’s work as little more than “an interesting man’s account of an interesting and unusual life” (Strauss 56) is, I believe, to do the poems an injustice. Afrika may write about incidents and

experiences that have marked his life, but, as we have seen in “Dancing in My City”, these poems usually have the ability to resonate further, so that his experiences become available to us through the poems, allowing us to see not his, but our *own* lives reflected in the lines of his best poems. This is how Schwartzman describes this aspect of Afrika’s poetry.

Afrika writes out of his own life, and yet that perceiving ‘I’ – for all its sensitivities and idiosyncrasies – often implies a community brought together by shared experience. [When he does use the word ‘we’]... that ‘we’ [is] handled with humility and care, claiming only the fact of a commonality of experience, not an exclusive authority to define it. (20)

The poem “Bruises” (*Nine Lives* 56) provides a wonderful example of the way in which Afrika manages to merge the autobiographical and the social, or the public and the private.

Bruises

You want me to tell you about the time they caught me with
the bomb?
Ah yes! I remember it as though it was yesterday –
some things better than others, of course...
like when they first charged me at the Maitland police station
and I did not have my glasses with me and so could not read
or write,
and old Sergeant Dolf, who should not have been there
because it is his people who are being oppressed,
let me have his, turning his face away from me
so that I wouldn’t see the pity in it, perhaps, or the shame.
And I thought: Jeez, these could have been my dad’s
the same old granny glasses with the round, steel rims,
and this from a man who, when he caught me, said:
“OK run, you bastard, run so that I can shoot you like a dog!”
And later there, I knew that I must pee,
and knew it until the child in me cried out in its need,
but the man in me, the bitter, angry man,
said: “Never will I plead.”
But I did and, broken, stood before a toilet-bowl,
only to find, with the guard watching, I could not pee!
And then there was the time they took me to Loop Street for
questioning,

and when I stepped out of the car with my unlaced shoes –
they take away your laces in jail, you know –
my one shoe caught on the curb and came off,
and there I stood with this naked sock
with a hole in the heel as big as my fist,
and all the people passing by and looking at it
while pretending not to look;
and I remembered my poor, dead mother who always asked,
“are your socks darned, are your underpants clean?
If a bus knocks you down, I don’t want people to ask
what sort of a mother you have”.
And then, of course, the trial...
we had so many magistrates,
some brutal, some bland.
Their faces have all left me now,
balloons on the wind.
But the face of the last one I will always remember,
our paths having snagged a little as they crossed.
He never looked up from his writing, but his bald head
lent him a fatherly look,
and when I made my plea at the end of the case,
I felt he was listening to me,
like a friend or my dad.
I liked him and thought
if more of the *maboer* were like him,
maybe, one day, we could stop throwing bombs at each other
and get on with living our lives.
And I was certain I was right about him when I stopped
and he looked up at me for the first time and smiled
and cracked a little joke,
a twisty little joke he seemed to think I would readily
understand,
and my heart grew warm at being treated
like an intelligent human being again,
and my shoulders squared with the first intimations
of pride and hope –
“I give you four years”, he said, and lowered his head.
Why do I not tell you of the terrible things you ask?
The kick in the groin, the fist in the face?
My tjom, what I have told you are the terrible things...
none worse.

Given our knowledge of the poet’s own imprisonment, it is almost impossible to see this poem as an objective, imaginative, account of arrest and detention as told by an anonymous speaker. The colloquial expressions (“my tjom”[63], “maboer”

[48]), the specific naming of people and places (“Maitland police station”[5], “Sergeant Dolf” [8]), and the intimacy of the small details, (“I could not pee!” [21]) all create the impression of an absence of artifice, the presence of lived experience. This idea is further reinforced by the poem’s rhythm and language, which are so close to the core of common South African English that it can almost be skip-read, so that the impression is of a spontaneous candid speaking voice directly addressing us and showing a specific concern for our wishes (“You want me to tell you...” [1]). However, it is important to remember that – in spite of the seductiveness of the colloquial voice here – this poem is an act of artificial (or recreated) rather than natural speech, and as such it is more than a mere autobiographical tale, an ordinary personal story told by a man who has lived a difficult life.

If, for instance, one looks closely at the rhythm of the poem, it soon becomes obvious that, linguistically speaking, this tale is quite un-ordinary. The first six lines are so close to the natural cadences of South African speech that they simply gallop off the page. This easy flow of words and meaning, however, is abruptly halted in the seventh line by the “unnatural” pause when the word “write” is placed alone in its own line. By breaking up the two words (read and write), which usually signifies a single concept (literacy), Afrika creates an entirely “artificial” pause, a “blank space”. This allows the reader just enough time to reflect on the implications, to realize how completely helpless the speaker must have felt, and then to realize that this was not his plight alone. In a country where so many people were denied the right to a decent education, *thousands* had to face the might of the state without even being able to read or write – and suddenly this personal tale “expands” to become the story of a whole community, of not one but many people. We find the same kind of device in line 23, where the word “questioning” is also placed alone in a line. Once again, the result is to place the word in a “vacuum”, which allows the reader to remember that this word (“questioning”) was one of the terrible euphemisms of the apartheid regime, a code word that could signify the most horrific torture practices.

In discussing the way in which Polish poets had to deal with the tragic events of the 20th century, Czeslaw Milosz puts forth the theory that:

...once reality surpasses any means of naming it, it
can be attacked only in a roundabout way, as it is
reflected in somebody's subjectivity. (93)

This, I think, is what happens in a poem like "Bruises". The horrible and degrading ceremonies of contempt described here – arrest, "questioning", imprisonment – took place on such a scale during the apartheid years that it became an everyday tragedy, one of those sad facts of South African life. Looking back on it today, it is almost impossible for us to calculate the human cost – the scale of the tragedy is simply too large. When we try to think of it we encounter an emotional "block" in the same way as when hearing of an earthquake in which thousands have died. The picture is too big, we cannot understand it, cannot feel it. What Afrika does in a poem like "Bruises", however, is to show us not the big, but the *small* picture, to personalize and individualize the suffering of thousands by presenting us with just one, perfectly detailed, "personal" miniature.

And the details he picks speak of such a painful human vulnerability that they *hurt*. Most readers will, hopefully, never know what it means to receive "the kick in the groin, the fist in the face" (62), but even those who lead privileged, secure lives know how it feels to be trapped in an embarrassing body, to feel someone's cold gaze on the hole in a "naked sock" (27), and this pulls us into the world of the poem, makes it real. Whole books have been written on the extent to which the South African psyche has been scarred during the apartheid years, how, in one way or another, all of us were affected, "bruised". But when we read that "Sergeant Dolf", the man who lends his "old granny glasses" to the speaker while turning his head away in "pity or shame", is the same one who earlier threatened to shoot him "like a dog" (8-15), we are *shocked* into understanding the enormity of the problem through the small and everyday, human implications. In the

figures of “Sergeant Dolf” and the “fatherly” (59) Magistrate, in other words, Afrika conveys the unremitting and all-pervasive nature of the apartheid system – its terrible ability to divide and shatter communities, turning even otherwise “kind” people into brutal enforcers – in a way that is concrete and human rather than abstract and theoretical.

If this is autobiographical poetry, it is of a special kind, because in speaking of one life, one experience, it brings the lives and experiences of many suddenly, unexpectedly, into focus. Swartzman perceptively summarizes this aspect of Afrika’s poetry as follows:

Few [South African poets] have written as directly out of the ordinary experiences of the radicalized public – that collection of anonymous faces fleeting across the television screen – as Tatamkhulu Afrika. In lifting one ‘I-experience’ from that momentarily collective ‘we’, Afrika’s poetry invests the faceless crowd with a humanity usually obscured. His poetry concretizes what is often reduced to abstraction. (20)

Tatamkhulu Afrika tackles not only South Africa’s painful past but also its painful present in this way. Poverty, inequality, lawlessness, and violence, Afrika portrays all these problems – features of South African life which many find so overwhelmingly traumatic that they simply close their eyes and freeze their hearts – in a way that allows the reader a fuller, more human, response to them. We experience the reality of our country filtered through the subjectivity of someone who is deeply sensitive, who has an extraordinary empathy for all human beings, and “who has no eyelids to hide behind”.¹¹

But Afrika does not merely look; unlike the stereotype of the poet who observes from the sidelines, he writes from the perspective of someone who is deeply and actively *involved*. His poetry therefore has an immediacy and tension which engage us in a particularly powerful way. Instead of waxing poetical on the abstractions of Fear or the moralities of Violence, for instance, or stylishly

complaining about our country's lawlessness, Afrika presents us with the following lines in "The Mugging" (*Dark Rider* 33):

He is on my back,
bearing me to the ground;
the breath bursts from me like air
from a ruptured balloon:
I feel the skin
peel away from my knees.
Others are rising now,
like leopards, from the stones,
pinioning me with hot,
predatory hands.
His knife glitters, bright
as the beyond-the-city,
beautiful stars,
ludicrous as my unseemly sprawling here.
The blade nicks my throat,
steadies in a small,
silent pool of pain.
The others strip me
of clothing, shoes;
their hands move about me
like devil-lovers' hands,
shocking into sensitivity
my serene, celibate skin,
flopping aside even my genitals
with passionless aplomb. (30-55)

For those of us who have experienced a violent attack this scene is terribly familiar. The sense of unreality, the inappropriate thoughts ("bright / as the beyond-the city / beautiful stars" [41-43]), the feeling of violation ("like devil-lover's hands" [51]), the animal fear ("rising now, / like leopards, from the stones" [37-38]) all ring horribly true. There is a rawness to the description which makes us believe in the authenticity of the experience, the speaker's voice has the authority of someone who has *felt*, rather than witnessed, the violence in our society. At the end of the poem the speaker has been robbed of his "week's wage" (65), but has, thankfully, survived the attack. Bruised and violated, he wonders in the final stanza:

Am I still here,
stones troubling my spine,
grass-stem sticking in my eyes,
or does this naked, lonely body run
with them over the harsh,
desperate lava of the land? (72-77)

The image of the “harsh / desperate lava of the land” is wonderfully evocative. It suggests a thin, unstable crust over a sea of fire, the dangerous and volatile after-effect of a violent and powerful eruption of forces that could no longer be contained. It is “harsh” and barren, but also the beginning of something different, a new hardness, a new soil, which will, over a period of many years, become solid and fertile again. The image is so resonant that it begins to encompass the world outside the small incident described in the poem. Once again, in other words, the experience is “enlarged” so that it becomes a record of the experience of everyone trying to survive in this desperate, unstable country.

The hesitant understanding offered to the attackers in the last few lines of the poem is therefore complex and challenging, betraying neither a simplistic moralizing (of the “one should have sympathy with one’s enemies” kind), nor a half-hidden, school-boyish admiration of violence. It is rather the kind of understanding that comes from a deep sense of empathy, an identification with others so intense that it enables the speaker to place himself in the position of the “other” even with stones “troubling” his spine, with a “grass-stem” sticking in his eyes. Such deep empathy is possible because the speaker looks beyond himself, beyond his own experiences, to see a greater context – a greater reality of which he is but a small part. And because he speaks from a position of intense involvement, this imaginative leap on his part can be viewed by the reader as inspiring rather than condescending or moralistic. Nadine Gordimer classifies this kind of poetry as “witness literature” as it is based on a “duality of inwardness and the outside world” and quotes Kafka in this regard: “writers see among ruins ‘different’ (and more things than others)... it is a leap out murderer’s row; it is a seeing of what is really taking place” (5).

Because Afrika's poetry is based on this kind of "duality of inwardness and the outside world", we have seen how it speaks not only of the poet's life, but also of *our* lives, how a fusion of the "private" and the "public" takes place which allows us, through the device of the first person speaker, to enlarge our own lives, to broaden our experience, to see through other eyes. This, in other words, is a poetry which is not alienated, it is a true act of communication between poet and reader which enables us to see ourselves in relation to others. The need for this kind of poetry seems obvious when one considers that our society is probably one of the most divided in the world – and not only on the basis of race but also, and perhaps even more importantly today, on the basis of wealth. In South Africa, the gap between those who have and those who do not at times seems unbridgeable: an abyss of almost unbearable fear and suspicion, jealousy and guilt.

To write poetry about the reality of poverty has always been incredibly tricky, and not least because of the perception that poetry is an elitist art form, the domain of the rich and privileged educated classes. A poet who ventures into this area therefore has to chart a way, as sensitively as can be managed, between the extremes of a self-pitying hatred on the one hand, and a self-indulgent guilt (or a patronizing, pitying smugness) on the other. Because of his personal history, however, Tatamkhulu Afrika can approach this heartbreaking reality of South African life from a very special position which allows him to avoid many of the above-mentioned pitfalls.

Tatamkhulu Afrika's life is a testimony to his very real devotion to the marginalized, poor and disenfranchised members of society. After Afrika, as he puts it, "started to think seriously about life and living", he formed a charitable organization called "Al-Jihaad" and devoted his life "to earn money to help the poor" (Berold 38). In the process, as he wryly explains, he became poor himself, comforted only by the knowledge that "at least [he] wasted his money on a good cause" (Berold 38). This deep devotion and sense of commitment has also

influenced his poetry in important ways. Afrika himself explains his approach in the following way:

I'd like to be read by all people; by whites,
privileged whites, people who could do so much to
alleviate deprivation in this land and are not doing
so, but also to be read by people who are poverty
stricken that they might know, understand, that
there are people who care. Whether it'll help them
in the long run, materially, I don't believe. It might
help them spiritually to some extent, and that's
about it. (Berold 40)

It is exactly this kind of down-to-earth, common-sensical and yet deeply caring attitude which we find in the "autobiographical voice" in Afrika's poetry. The "self" which observes those around him feels such a deep compassion for those who have been broken by poverty and hardship that one is reminded of Wilfred Owen's famous words: "The Poetry is in the Pity".¹² And like Owen's own brutal and brilliant work, the pity at the heart of Afrika's work is never easy or sentimental because it speaks of the poet's "compulsion to identify with the oppressed",¹³ his deep sense of *responsibility* towards others, rather than a paralyzing sense of guilt or a subtle kind of condescension.

In the poem "The Coin" (*Dark Rider* 18), for instance, the speaker notices a certain homeless woman because:

She was not like the rest;
did not beg, did not look up even
when I passed:
just sat there, wrapped
in a stoical, stone calm. (1-5)

While the other homeless people remain "peripheral / featureless as flies" (15-16) (the harsh nature of this description being in itself a subtle confession of a certain failure on the speaker's part), something about this woman keeps on haunting him. He learns that "she was from the farm" (18) and starts to see her in heartbreaking, shocking, detail:

Back against a tree,

skeletal buttocks scuffing grass
from underlying clay,
spread hands, black
as bird's claws, dropped,
palm up, onto her thighs,
dirt of untold wandering deep
as blood in the worn pores. (31-38)

Everyone who has experienced the guilt of having enough while others are suffering knows that one finally learns not to see any more, to go through life in a kind of self-imposed blindness in order to avoid paralyzingly painful feelings of helplessness and guilt. While such an attitude speaks mainly of an attempt at self-preservation, it can also become something altogether more sinister in the way that it isolates people from one another, freezing feelings of compassion and sympathy. A poem such as this one, however, in the words of Kafka, acts as an “ice axe to break the frozen sea inside of us”¹⁴ in that it exchanges an emotional blindness for the kind of intense *seeing* which we find in the poem above. It is this kind of seeing that few of us allow ourselves; the kind of seeing that implies emotional or spiritual involvement and, eventually, responsibility. Afrika does not lecture the reader about this responsibility, but rather shares the speaker's own feelings of guilt and inadequacy. The woman keeps on haunting him, until:

...the day I did
what I should have known I would;
I stopped and offered her a coin. (60-62)

There is a certain weariness to these lines, the weary self-disgust often experienced by those who are willing to analyze their own motives even when performing so-called “charitable” deeds. This coin, he knows, is a “mercenary small piece” (66), a sop to his conscience, or, even worse, a piece of “bait” (69), a way to establish a connection with the “other” who so disturbs him. The last lines of this poem are simply devastating, conveying as they do both a dignified gratitude and a sad disillusionment on the part of the woman for whom a mere “coin” can never be enough:

Unhurriedly, carefully reaching out,
she took the bait;

took then also suddenly, my hand,
pressed her lips to it,
held it a moment as one who drowns,
let it go again,
turning from me tiredly as a lover turns
from unresponding flesh. (68-75)

The subtlety of this evoked response is typical of Afrika's poetry. The relationships between the people in his poetry are difficult, fragile and complex, and marked by equal measures of trust and distrust, acceptance and rejection. This is especially true of the way in which he depicts the complexity of racial relationships in this country. In their introduction to *Writing South Africa*, Jolly and Attridge argue that "the possibility of interchange between cultures" (9) is rarely recognized in the criticism of South African texts. Part of the problem, according to these writers, "lies in our fixation on difference" (9), in the way we tend to read difference as "having an essential and fundamentally incomprehensible content" – leading to what they call the "fetishization" of difference (10). In view of our country's past, it is easy to understand how this "fetishization" came about. In apartheid South Africa, the existence of racial identities was simplistically assumed to be a given, with "Africanness", in particular, always described in ethnic, racialized terms. This kind of official categorization, of course, was bound to have an impact on the creative minds and hearts of South Africans, and unfortunately – but probably, in a way, inevitably – a literary situation started to develop which lost its faith in the ability of art, imagination, and even empathy to transcend the social barriers, not only of race, but also of culture and class. Thus liberal white sentiments which sought identification with African perspectives came across as mere patronage, as "speaking on behalf of the oppressed" (Klopper, "Ideology" 285), while the notion of a "privileged access into the black soul" (Cronin 20) became an integral part of "black poetry" under the influence of the Black Consciousness movement. This kind of divide might have been logical (and even necessary) under a regime in which whites were placed in a position of superiority over blacks by virtue of the difference in skin colour alone. But at the same time it limited South African

literary practice in important ways. To make a poet a spokesperson for an ethnic group in a “natural” and uncritical way – by assuming that his or her insight into such a group is easy and spontaneous, can lead to what Cronin calls “aesthetic slackness” (20).¹⁵ Not only does it “obfuscate class differences” (Cronin 20), but other differences too: differences of sex and gender, of power, of temperament, of *individualities*. These, of course, are all terms which have been discredited in some way or another by the political discourse of the extreme left *and* the extreme right (depending on the nature of the terms), but it does seem that to deny that these differences impact on sites of identity in profound and subversive ways is to become truly trapped in the web of a paralyzing and mindless racial fetish.

One of the most interesting aspects of Tatamkhulu Afrika’s poetry is the way in which he avoids these simplistic categories: in his poems identity is portrayed as complex, shifting, and definitely more than skin deep. This, however, does not mean that race or colour is ever ignored; in fact, the opposite is true. His poetry simply brims over with the shades and colours of this country. The people in his poems are “coal black” or have “alabastrine skin”, they are “bland...blond”, “black [with an] ashen tinge”, “yellow”, or “black...shining”.¹⁶ There is hardly a person in his poems whose racial identity is not mentioned or hinted at, but surprisingly enough, the very *exactness* of his descriptions prevents any simplistic categorization of the “black, white or coloured” kind. His careful observation of race and colour acknowledges difference without fearing it and without fetishising it; instead, it becomes one of the many building blocks (all observed in equally fine detail) which constitute the identity of the characters in his poems.

In his poems, then, difference is never diminished, but because his observations are inherently driven by a need to *understand*, the potential for a common humanity is not denied. The poem “Pas de Trois” (*Dark Rider* 36), for instance, begins with the following stanzas:

They’re trying hard.
I watch him bow

his head to hers,
lank blond hair
lambent in the sun.
She does not respond:
lean to or turn from him
contrasting curls;
just watches the ball's spin.

He is strangely unperturbed:
sits back as though a hand
had nudged him on,
and now has set him free;
offers her instead some wine.
She accepts,
smiling easily, assured,
but does not touch his hand.

I listen to their talk:
consonants and vowels
capsulise voids.
They roll them between them
like beads;
string them on themes
of trivia they do not share:
silken-swiftly slip around
silences' pitfalls.

Gull swaggers up,
eyeing picnic-plates.
They toss it scraps;
for the first time genuinely laugh
together at its greed;
fleetingly touch hands.
But he does not follow up.
Hands fall back,
emptily onto the grass. (1-31)

In these lines, interestingly enough, the issue of skin colour is subtly underplayed. Hinted at in the first stanza ("lank blond hair" [4], contrasting curls" [8]), it takes second place to the more important, more deep-seated differences between the two. These two young people have no shared frame of reference; in spite of the fact that they share a country, they do not share a culture, they have no common language (14-20). And yet "Pas de Trois" is miles removed from the standard,

clichéd, South African love poem about “a doomed love across the colour line”. This is because the poem’s focus is not so much on the essential nature of the differences between these two as on the possibilities created by their similarities. The encounter is remarkable not for its “strangeness”, but for its sweetness. What we notice about these two people is not their racial backgrounds, but their youth and happiness, their confidence and easy good humour. Their flirtation is so good-natured, so innocent, that it creates the space where their differences can be imagined differently – as an exciting challenge perhaps, an opportunity to learn, even to play.

Their “story”, however, does not end happily. The space they inhabit is so precarious and delicate that it is easily destroyed by the bitterness of a drunken passerby; these young people cannot so easily escape the sins of the fathers. Their response to this humiliation, however, is so similar that we once again tend to see a real connection rather than an unbridgeable difference between them.

A drunken black man
is leaning over them,
groping the boy’s thigh,
telling him
there’s nothing like a black cunt’s fuck.
She covers her face with her hands;
he sits,
head hanging down,
heavy with the burden of its blood.

I watch them leave,
black man sniggering at their heels.
She turns her face,
hesitantly, to his,
but he does not respond:
strides silently on.
Pretty pink comb
she dropped as she passed,
is hurting in my hand. (41-58)

These last lines are undoubtedly rather depressing, but it is important to note that it does not deny the possibility of an interchange between cultures. The sadness is

that of a delicate beauty destroyed, of a rare opportunity lost. The boy's very shame shows his sensitivity to the girl's humiliation, his understanding of how he is, by racial association, implicated in this kind of crude, racist and sexist hate speech. The "[p]retty pink comb" (56) dropped by the girl, on the other hand, speaks of a concrete attempt to reach out to the young man, suggesting that his tentative overtures did make a deep impact, and that, perhaps, she is willing to forgive him "the burden of his blood" (49). This poem, therefore, does not gloss over the weighty implications of racial heritages in this country, but neither does it uncritically accept this situation as natural or inevitable. The social scars inflicted by our racist past run very deep, and yet, this poem seems to suggest, we stand to lose a great deal if we deny the next generation the chance to move forward, to discover their own identities in ways that are new, more complex, and less crippled by a racial obsession.

Above all, it is in the identity of the *speaker* in Tatamkhulu Afrika's poems that we see how a true openness to difference can be achieved, how the tyranny of race can lose its sting. In the great majority of the poems, it is very difficult to pinpoint the speaker's precise racial point of view – something so rare in South African poetry that it is almost unheard of. In "The Killing" (*Dark Rider* 56), for instance, he talks about his "too pale, stretched out / alien hand" (87-88), in "Dancing in My City" (*Dark Rider* 55) he mentions his "sweating blackskin" (44), and in "Last Lament of a Tribalist" (*Nine Lives* 32) he admits that he really sees the "motley" (33) people of the old District Six as his "tribe". If one keeps in mind that the man staring from the cover of his books *seems* to be incontestably "white", it is easy to see why this issue has led to some critical confusion. Thus, Brown, for instance, writes that "many" of Tatamkhulu Afrika's poems have "black speakers" (137), Horn argues that Afrika "never pretends to be part of what he is not" ("Spaces" 79), while Mann claims that he "writes with the point of view of a black South African and the language ability of a gifted first language English speaker" (8).

Earlier in this chapter, I have argued that it is an over-simplification to categorize Afrika's poetry as merely "autobiographical", and this certainly seems to be borne out by the way in which his speaker manages to exchange racial identities. Ironically enough, however, it is probably precisely *because* of the poet's own particular personal history that the speaker in his poems is able to display this chameleon-like quality. Born in 1920 to Egyptian and Turkish parents who migrated to South Africa and died shortly after his birth, Tatamkhulu Afrika was raised in "the Christian tradition" by a "white" English-speaking family in what was then the Western Transvaal. When he was about to leave school his foster mother told him that his parents had been "Asian" ("in those days anybody who came from the middle east was Asian 'coolie'"), and, in his own words, he was "lost, absolutely lost".¹⁷ To make matters even more complicated, Afrika later "adopted a second set of adoptive parents...[who] were Afrikaners" only to lose contact with them when he became a Muslim because he knew that "they would never forgive me".¹⁸ In the most race-obsessed country in the world, Tatamkhulu Afrika was given a rare choice: to "pass as white", thereby gaining untold privileges and advantages, or to be a "non-white" – officially, in effect, a non-person. Tatamkhulu Afrika did not only refuse to be classified as white, he also joined the armed struggle, was arrested for terrorism, and spent time in jail. Moreover, he threw his creative and physical weight behind the outcasts, the poorest of the poor, people whom he, like so many others, could easily have avoided.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that identity, in Afrika's poetry, is something complex and shifting, provocative and *achieved*, rather than a simplistic, autonomous given. His characters hardly ever conform to stereotypical expectations: quiet and friendly neighbours turn out to be drug-dealers ("Drug Dealer", *Dark Rider* 31), proud heroes of the struggle become alcoholics ("The Veteran", *Nine Lives* 42) and downtrodden wives show unexpected political activism ("The Labourer", *Maqabane* 82). Afrika's poetry is therefore one of the places where South African literature can regain what Bennet and Royle describe

as one of literature's most astonishing and important functions: "its capacity to question, defamiliarize and even transform the sense of who or what we are" (122).

However, even if Afrika's work does explore and reflect on the nature of personal identity in all its complexity and unpredictability, one should be wary of speaking too easily of the importance of the "individual" in Afrika's poetry. This is because the term "individual" (from the Latin *individuus*, "undivided" or "not divisible" [Bennet and Royle 123]) perhaps too easily retains connotations of the "I" as detached from everything, a free agent. Afrika's characters are never simply "free", they do not exist in a vacuum. He never denies that his characters are subject to forces and effects from within as well as outside themselves: they are *subjects* as defined by the French theorist Foucault:

There are two meanings of the word "subject":
subject to someone else by control and dependence
and tied to one's own identity by conscience or self-
knowledge.¹⁹

Although Afrika therefore affords his subjects a very definite space to express their own identities, he never denies the immense political and personal importance of the *collective* identity in South African life. Afrika may have experienced the enormous power of individual choice in his own life, but he is clearly also well aware of the reality of those who have *no* choice, who are trapped in a world which denies them the freedom to shape their own destinies by keeping them imprisoned within the confines of a limiting ethnicity.²⁰ This is why, in spite of his chameleon-like quality, Peter Horn is correct (to repeat the quotation above) when he says that Tatamkhulu Afrika "never pretends to be part of what he is not". In a poem like "Old Spoor" (*Maqabane* 55) for instance, he is painfully aware of his difference, his otherness, and that – in a country where appearances mean so much – he is also subjected to "the politics of the gaze".

But now they watch my feet
eyes alert
for raggedness of beat,

ineptness that will betray
I have no place
in this
my heart's soil. (94-100)

Whereas in "Dancing in My City" it was the gaze of the white spectators who would deny him a place in his own city, here it is the black gaze who demands to see his credentials, "studying [him] with sly/ quick/ turnings of the eye" (68-70). As in the aforementioned poem, the speaker achieves his sense of belonging not by the easy affiliation of skin colour, but by the difficult will to connect with what is shared, with a humanity held in common by all of us. The acceptance which he finds, in spite of the colour of his skin, is hesitant and qualified and based entirely on the fact of his long-standing friendship with a member of their community:

and he's back with me
after so long a time,
arm in mine,
young warrior of the year
of the young lions (104-108)
...
And now some, turning smile,
and I am smiling back,
ready to be liked. (209-211)

In a country where it has so long been accepted that people from different races are simply not ready to like or be liked by one another, the last line quoted above makes the speaker seem curiously vulnerable and almost naïve. And yet it takes a certain bravery to reach out to others in this way, a bravery and a sense of trust which are rare and, in a country like South Africa, profoundly valuable. This poem ends rather tragically, but, as in "Pas de Trois", it is the tentative attempt to reach out rather than the final failure which lingers in the reader's mind. And this, finally, is Afrika's triumph: that his poetry not only speaks of a reaching out between the speaker and the many different kinds of people of this land, but that it is in *itself* a reaching out towards the reader, whoever he or she may be: a sharing, a gift.

Endnotes :

1. See the discussion in Chapter 1 concerning the ideal of “pure” art, art for the sake of art alone, removed from the messiness of ordinary people’s lives.
2. Needless to say, the vast majority of these critics were part of a privileged white elite who felt themselves profoundly challenged by the new “black” writing.
3. As quoted in Achebe (*Hopes* 30).
4. As quoted in Cronin (19), my emphasis.
5. See, for instance, Kelwyn Sole’s article “Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions”.
6. See, for instance, Chapter 3 about the limitations of “political poetry”.
7. This is a phrase Tatamkhulu Afrika likes to use to describe himself (Shenfeld 10).
8. From “Song of Myself” (*Leaves of Grass*, 1888)
9. Dobyns uses this term in his discussion of Whitman (203).
10. Thus, Dobyns can rightly argue that “*Paradise Lost* is not about Milton, but it is completely *of* him. It has his flesh and blood, his psychology, personality, essence” (200).
11. According to Peter Horn, this is the “true sign of the poet” (“Spaces” 81).
12. From his “Manifesto” as quoted in Heaney (xiv).
13. This is how Heaney defines a “witness poet” (xvi).
14. The full quote is as follows: “A book should be an ice-axe to break the frozen sea inside of us” (Letter to Oskar Pollak, 27 January 1904).
15. See also Sole’s eloquent criticism in “Culture, Politics and the Black Writer”.
16. References: “The Hole Digger” (*Dark Rider* 13); “The Squaring” (*Dark Rider* 91); “Interrogator” (*Dark Rider* 72); “Rasta” (*Nine Lives* 16); “Dancing in my City” (*Dark Rider* 53); “Slave Band” (*Nine Lives* 18).
17. These quotations are taken from the Berold interview (36).

18. See Shenfeld (9).

19. See Bennet and Royle (19).

20. This limitation was, of course, in the past an official one. Today these confines are unofficial but still rather powerful – a harsh reality of South African life.

“A tale still not told”: Writing political poetry

It has become almost clichéd to observe that all South Africans have been marked in some way or another by our country's turbulent political past – that politics has seeped through the very soul of our society to affect people in profound and indelible ways. While apartheid produced a great many heroes and martyrs (most of them unknown and unsung), it also seems as if, in many ways, it scarred every one of us (black and white, conservative and radical) very deeply, and our cultural life certainly did not escape this maiming, this *narrowing*. For years the South African literary world was defined by what De Kock and Tromp call “the most cramping of dualisms” (105). Poetry, in particular, became a “site of struggle”, a battlefield between those who were “convinced (for the best of reasons) that politics is the literal pre-text of all worthwhile poetry, and those ... who were not so sure that art should be wholly subsumed by political imperatives” (Watson “Poetry Today” 15). On the one side, in other words, we had talented and committed people who strongly believed that a poem's value was mainly dependent on its ideological content: “a defeatist attitude, however ‘memorably phrased’ was enough to condemn the poem” (Chapman *Literatures* 335). On the other side we had equally talented and committed people (although this commitment might have had a slightly different focus), who believed that apartheid should not have a stranglehold on art, who believed that poetry should be elevated “above the partisan, worldly sphere of political mendacity” (De Kock and Tromp 123).

On one level, of course, this disagreement can be seen as merely one more version of the old fight between classicism and realism which has already been discussed in Chapter 1. The poets who, regardless of the immediate political situation, wanted to transform “universal” and “timeless” themes into lasting aesthetic

masterpieces can be seen as leaning towards classicism; those who tried to make their work “relevant” and “responsible” in the hope of truly affecting their community, as leaning towards realism. The politics of crisis, however, made this disagreement about the role and function of poetry into something far more bitter and damaging than a mere theoretical aesthetic dispute, and in retrospect, sadly, it would seem as if poetry itself turned out to be the real loser in this battle. At its worst, during the crisis period of the 1980s, we too often saw South African poetry divided between an escapist, individualistic fiddling (while the country was burning) and a simplistic, propagandistic sloganeering (with our hearts and minds slowly dying).

The poetry and criticism of this period and its immediate aftermath, then, raised some intensely thorny issues about the nature of art, its relationship with “reality”, and its function in times of crisis. What is the role of art in political life? What is the artist’s responsibility in times of crisis? Can the artist’s concern with form, style and beauty ever be reconciled with the demands of ethics and politics? Much has, of course, been written on this subject, but I believe that Tatamkhulu Afrika’s poem “The Squaring” (*Dark Rider* 91) examines these issues in a deeper and more perceptive way than most of the criticism available on the subject. I therefore quote the poem in full.

The Squaring

The carefully cultivated hands
toy with her glass’s frail stem,
alabastrine skin
barely concealing exquisite bones.
The clear, white wine,
luminous in its cupping shell,
sways behind her fingers,
bloodless, slim
as fishes trembling in
the surrealities of their bowl.
She smiles:
a thin baring of the tongue.
She is, she says, tired of all these revolutionary plays:

she goes to the theatre to be amused,
not suffer other people's pain.

I think of my visit to Thandi the night before:
how we had sat in the small, grey rooms till dawn,
watching the wind riffle the grey sand,
listening to her thin, dry, papery voice sigh
in a thin, dry, papery monotone,
telling how this one's father had been hung
by his braces from the bars of his cell,
and that one's mother had been raped
and then cut up with a bottle till she died,
and that one's brother had had his eyes plucked out
and had lain there staring up
at the skew-hung orange half-moon,
and this old friend would not be calling anymore because
his head was flopping like a chicken's when they carried
him
back home.

And I sat there pinned
by a horror I could not flee because
it was etched on the lenses of my eyes
as it was etched on hers though
she folded her hands upon her belly and,
with a bellowing desperate as her hounds', strained
for deliverance from her pain.

And I look at this woman, here, now,
toying with her glass's thin stem,
so tired of a tale still not told,
but one that will someday be told,
forcing itself upon her while she howls,
staining her bedsheets with the blood
of her virginity, dry
white orgasm of pain.

At a first glance, this poem may seem to make a simplistic judgement by pitting crude stereotypes against each other: white against black, ignorance against experience, privilege against suffering, art against politics. The restraint of the tone, however, together with the carefully chosen metaphors and the sorrow at the heart of the poem, should alert us to the fact that Afrika is not out to attack any "easy targets" here; this poem does not strive for a narrow "political correctness".

The speaker is, of course, criticizing the callousness of a certain human attitude which wants “to be amused” (14) above all else and therefore refuses to “suffer other people’s pain” (15). But the poem does not rest on this kind of comfortable, conventional and “easy” condemnation – it digs deeper to examine more difficult, more disturbing issues.

In the “post-modern” world in which we live, most people have come to realize that we do not all share the same “reality”, and it is this difficult insight which lies at the centre of Afrika’s poem. “Thandi’s” world is one of almost intolerable suffering, violence and loss, while the other unnamed woman’s world is one of wealth, privilege and “culture”. While we may therefore condemn the white woman’s callousness, it is important to remember that it is not so much her attitude, but *reality itself* that rises like a wall between the two women described in the poem. The world she lives in is so far removed from Thandi’s, that one is left to wonder whether anything exists – words, art, representation – that can bridge the gap in understanding, that can make the suffering all around anything else than “other people’s pain” (15) to her. She may thus well make the required liberal effort to watch “revolutionary plays” (and, no doubt, might “understand” the need for such an art form on an intellectual level), but it remains something that leaves her cold – it says nothing to her about *her* life, *her* world. Someone in her position, with her leisure and wealth, her sophistication and cleverness, needs a different *kind* of art, something that is as beautiful and cultured (and, perhaps, as cold) as she is, something with the power to “amuse”.

The root of the problem, it seems, lies in the tragedy of a country so divided that a common system of values, whether moral or aesthetic, simply cannot exist. In the world inhabited by the white woman (a world of sophistication and privilege as “frail” [2] as the stem of her wineglass, as “carefully cultivated” [1] as her hands) it may seem entirely reasonable and even necessary to insist on aesthetically pleasing, “amusing” works of art. But when such a world is juxtaposed with the cruel reality of the world Thandi lives in, such an insistence becomes “bloodless”

(8), closer to an ignorant unkindness than a justifiable concern. From the perspective of someone in Thandi's position, all this theorising about "different realities" is bound to seem frivolous and entirely artificial. In the face of a reality that is massive, overwhelming and terrifying in its concreteness, such an argument sounds like mere theoretical self-indulgence. What someone in her situation needs is not an amusing and clever aesthetic masterpiece but an art form in which art and language can recover their original function: to name and make sense of a tangible and threatening reality, and – hopefully – to mobilize people to change this reality.

In the final place, this poem is disturbing not only because it paints a picture of a tragically divided country, but also because it suggests that art, culture, and even language itself can do little to bridge this divide, to close the gap in understanding. The world in which Thandi lives is one where violence and pain are so real that they are felt deep *within*, "etched" (34) onto the body itself. There is no adequate way to convey such suffering to someone not touched by it – a point Afrika as a poet makes by keeping lines 20-30 bare, factual, devoid of poetic artifice. In the face of such suffering, words can only ever be "thin, dry [and] papery" (19), and we are left to wonder whether certain zones of reality may not be beyond the power of words, beyond speech, beyond representation, art. This is why the ending of the poem is so very disconcerting. We are left with the terrible suggestion that language, poetry and art can sometimes fail; that certain "tales" can only be told through a harsher, more painful language which exists beyond, beneath words – the language of "blood" (43), of "howls" (42), of "force" (42) and of "pain" (45).

This poem, then, would seem to suggest that the above-mentioned debate which pitted "aesthetic value" against "political imperatives" was actually not so much a true argument as an instance of parallel discourses: discourses that could only be understood within their own framework by people who inhabit the same sphere of reality and the same intellectual context. The issue is ultimately one that reaches

to the very essence of what we perceive as art, the criteria by which we judge such art, and the role we believe art to play in relation to “reality”. Thus, on the one hand, one may argue that from a purely *aesthetic* viewpoint it may be very difficult for a poet in the midst of a huge political crisis to create a great work of art; some distance, some objectivity seems to be required – what W.B. Yeats called “a cold eye”.¹ But on the other hand, on a socially responsible and entirely *human* level, one nonetheless feels that it is sometimes better to stutter with the urgency of a “thin, dry, papery monotone” than to compose smooth sentences, to wait for the perfect word while all around one people are subjected to a real and terrible suffering.

Seamus Heaney argues that in times of great suffering, poets are often embarrassed because of “the artfulness of their art” (xviii) – there is a feeling that their “song constitute[s] a betrayal of suffering” (xii), that considerations of art and beauty become irrelevant because of the “usual instinctive need which a human being feels in such situations to lament, if not try to prevent, the fate of the stricken” (xii). At such times, the artist is haunted by the “archetypal if cartoonish” (xii) figure of Nero who notoriously fiddled while Rome burnt:

... an action which has ever since been held up as an example of human irresponsibility, if not callousness... [P]roverbially, it has come to stand for actions which are frivolous to the point of effrontery, and useless to the point of insolence.
(xii)

In view of our country’s painful past, it thus seems clear why those poets and critics who pleaded for artistic considerations and verbal restraint during the height of the apartheid era were often vilified as callous or irresponsible – the shadow of Nero simply loomed too large over them. It is equally clear why a great deal of the poetry written during the most difficult part of the apartheid era sacrificed artistic considerations in favour of direct statement and open exhortation: in the face of such massive and blatant oppression and suffering, many poets saw aesthetic considerations as “frivolous to the point of effrontery” –

poems were seen as vehicles for delivering a message, and it was the message rather than the vehicle that was seen as important. As Mtshali put it:

We have not got time to embellish this urgent message with unnecessary and cumbersome ornaments like rhyme, iambic pentameters, abstract figures of speech, and an ornate and lofty style. We will indulge in these luxuries we can ill afford at the moment we are free people.²

Now that the historical moment has passed, it should therefore hardly be surprising that a great deal of the poetry thus written can be criticized as lacking in subtlety, nuance and irony: “people thrown in the middle of events that tear cries of pain from their mouths [often] have difficulty in finding the distance needed to transform their material artistically” (Milosz 83). What *is* surprising is that there were some poets who overcame the challenges posed by the political situation (names like Serote, Cronin, Mtshali, De Kok, Sepamla, Gwala, Nortje and, of course, Afrika himself immediately spring to mind), who proved that “committed” and overtly political poetry does not have to be mere sloganeering, but that fine works of art can be produced even in the most difficult circumstances.

Because of our country’s specific literary and political history, I have, up to this point, discussed the role of art in political life in terms of a construction that pits aesthetic standards against political imperatives in a natural, almost inevitable manner. It is, however, important to remember that such a construction is open to an almost immediate *deconstruction*, as all art is, in some way or another “political”. Whether a poet is enthusing about nature or criticising social injustices, he or she is engaged in an activity that makes others aware of the world and helps them to live in the world – Picasso surely spoke on behalf of artists in every medium when he gave the following (rather testy) reply to a question about the role of art in regards to politics:

What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has nothing but eyes if he is a painter or ears if he is a musician, or a lyre at every level of his heart if he is

a poet? Quite the contrary, he is at the same time a political being, constantly aware of what goes on in the world, whether it be harrowing, bitter or sweet, and he cannot help being shaped by it.³

That said, it is true that some artists engage with the political issues of their time in more overt and deliberate ways than others: like those poets mentioned above, for instance, Tatamkhulu Afrika is not only “shaped” by political events all around him, but (at least in the three volumes discussed in this thesis) writes poetry that “draws (some of) its strength from its engagement with the political struggle, that in some sense wakes the sleeping heart and steels the timid spine, which *stakes its success* on being able to do this” (Schwartzman 21). The rest of this chapter is therefore devoted to the issues surrounding such apparently unmistakably “political” poetry; more specifically, I shall try to present Tatamkhulu Afrika as an example of a South African artist who has managed to overcome many of the difficulties and limitations associated with overtly “political” art.

If one looks past the whole “aesthetics versus politics” débacle discussed above, the greatest criticism levelled against overtly political verse in the South African context (which became known as “protest” or “struggle” poetry during the apartheid years) was that it reduced South African reality to its political dimension alone, and that it further reduced that dimension to what was negatively exemplary about it.⁴ Even if one keeps in mind that this kind of poetry was meant as a “weapon”, a tool to mobilize and ideologically empower people,⁵ it is disconcerting to read much of it from a 21st century perspective – so much seems relentlessly brutal, hateful, almost inhuman. It is as if that period of our country’s history was, for some, nothing but an undifferentiated block of horrors, and ironically enough, this has the peculiar effect of somehow reducing the humanity of the people described in the poems. Were there not also friendships under apartheid, one is inclined to ask when reading some of this verse, and love, and personal joy and private pain? Did nobody make jokes about the

ridiculousness of the regime? Were people only capable of a humourless hatred, an earnest and unrelenting sorrow?⁶ Many felt, in other words, that the space allocated to “committed” poetry was simply too narrow: that the exclusive focus on politics as a theme reduced the full humanity of the people described in the poems, simplified a complex reality, and misrepresented the vitality and vibrancy of black South African culture. A critic such as Njabulo Ndebele (to name but one) thus criticized the fact that (in contrast to the confidence, joy and sense of belonging to be found in South African music) South African writing so completely “located itself in the field of politics” (85). Instead, he argued, “our literature ought to move away from an easy pre-occupation with demonstrating the obvious existence of oppression” (158) and show a greater interest in the broader spectrum of “ordinary” life in South Africa:⁷

This interest involves a range of vital human concerns...questions of loyalty and betrayal; of bravery and cowardice; of anxiety and contentment; of rigidity and adaptation; of cruelty and compassion; of honour and dishonour; of pride and humility... (159)

As argued above, Tatamkhulu Afrika is an overtly “political poet” in the sense that he, as Schwartzman puts it:

...makes art from the vocabulary of a particular political and social experience: the rally, the protesting crowd, the toyi-toyi, the act of state terror, the act of defiance, the funeral, the work-queue, the robbery, the sufferings of poverty, the violence, fear, anomie, solidarity, desperation and triumph that variously attend these experiences. (21)

At the same time, however, he is acutely aware of the dangers of an unreflective and one-dimensional rhetoric of protest; his stated aim is for a poetry that can reach and reflect the lives of ordinary men and women “while avoiding the ‘charlatan’, the purveyor under the guise of ‘people’s art’ of the slogan and the cliché”.⁸ He therefore casts his poetic net wide to include a broad range of political issues and predicaments as filtered through the “normal” experiences of

ordinary South Africans. His poems tell not only of the tragedy of lives ruined by imprisonment and torture (“Psycho” [*Dark Rider* 78]; “The Veteran” [*Nine Lives* 48]) and the pain and waste of trust and relationships broken under extreme pressure, but also of long and enduring friendships that the might of the state could never touch (“Backwash”, *Nine Lives* 44), of the warmth and intimacy shared by humble people (“Parker”, *Dark Rider* 83) and the joy and affection experienced by those who had a common sense of purpose (“Remembering” *Maqabane* 69). In addition, his work reflects people as they are, rather than as the political dogma would like them to be. We are thus presented with “Umkhonto’s macho men” who could “shiver” both in anger *and* in fear (“Burial”, *Dark Rider* 62), and with the complexities of men who could be “gentle”, “shy” and “slow” as well as brutally violent (“Lines to a Dead Comrade in a Ditch”, *Nine Lives* 46). Throughout, the focus of Afrika’s poetry is on the mystery of human situations in the midst of political turmoil, and his gift for empathy, his capacity for feeling, and his intimate understanding of the local situation never allow the full South African reality to be reduced to the mechanics of simplistic oppositional politics only.

Moreover, in spite of the “political” nature of so much of Tatamkhulu Afrika’s work, the need for preserving a closed personal space removed from the outside world is never denied. In the poem “Backwash” (*Nine Lives* 44), for instance, he tells of a man who, because of his immense courage in fighting the “colossus of conceit astride our aching land” (33), became a “name, a legend, whom men approached / with awe” (35-36).

But then came the days when the killing eased,
the sudden ebbing of the people’s war,
and you, caught up in it, found your hands curled,
suddenly weaponless, upon your idle knees.
It was then the drinking started and you,
who up till then had tended the warring carriage of your
flesh
as carefully as you had cleaned and oiled the weapons that it
bore,
drank as mightily as with your every other deed and,

gargantuan in your excesses as in your restraints, once
severe,
became the mindless, shambling, sometimes crying thing
that today sits mostly in a corner in the sun,
huddled up over the chill pit of its limitless despair. (40-55)

The tragedy Afrika tells of in this poem is the tragedy of a life completely reduced to politics; the crisis experienced by someone who had little left that is personal, intimate and removed from politics to sustain him when “the killing eased” (44). In South Africa politics have traditionally been seen as something which destroys the intimate or, to put it differently, the political reality was seen as more important than the personal: as a moral imperative (many believed) individual needs had to take second place to communal duties. The need for such total political commitment is certainly not denied in this poem, but Afrika also shows the darker side of such complete dedication, the terrible human cost demanded, the sheer human *waste* our country’s political injustices led to.

Even in the most “political” of Afrika’s poetry, then, people still have an unusual human dignity and a sense of mystery that offer a welcome relief from the harshly deterministic view of so much political poetry, where people are often seen as mere ciphers mindlessly fulfilling certain pre-determined roles. This sense of mystery comes from a private, intimate and “personal” dimension which Afrika acknowledges in all his characters: a space of solitude, of the self.

In the poem “People’s Hero” (*Maqabane* 60), for instance, we find a moving example of how Afrika sees in even the most helpless of people a deeper dimension, a subliminal region where the most profound and most “other” parts of the individual exist. In the beginning of the poem he describes how a hero of the struggle, now wheelchair-bound, unable to talk and completely helpless, is taken to a political meeting.

Propped in his wheelchair,
indecently centre stage,
bright blue sunshade fixed
to the chair’s back, he’s

the dusted-off, sedated, black
icon from our past,
prime exhibit for the day. (9-15)

The withering cynicism of the last line, as well as the words “indecently” and “dusted-off” imply a certain sense of indignation and even disgust on the speaker’s part, a sense that this person is not being honoured but being *used*, his full humanity denied for the sake of an empty political symbolism. (Seen as empty because there is no real respect involved, the man is treated like an automaton mindlessly performing his “duties” – a view that in itself betrays the political ideals he fought for.) In the next few lines Afrika then attempts to humanize this “icon”, to re-claim for him – even in his present wrecked condition – a true personality behind the heroic but inhuman political mask. We learn about his impressive commitment, his compassion, his very human pain and his capacity for friendship:

I remember the day
He first came out of prison and I laid
my cheek to his cheek and wept,
and he wept in desolate return. (53-56)

Lines like these allow us to see the vulnerability and the humanity of this “icon” without in any way diminishing his heroic status or the worth of his contribution. But while Afrika does attempt to humanize this “hero”, the poem is far removed from a “feel-good”, great-man-behind-the-persona, “Oprah Winfrey-style” exposé. Afrika’s gaze is too detached, his vision too complex, to allow us an easy pity or a simplistic “identification” with his subject. The poem ends in the following way:

Is he staring at the wall again
happy, perhaps, that there were some who cared?
Or did something frighteningly other, trapped
in the known, loved shape,
thresh out against the hindering of our hands? (86-90)

In spite of his physical disability, his tragic life and his helplessness, Afrika still sees something mysterious and hidden in this person that defies a comfortable,

pitying sympathy. From a political point of view this man may be a mere symbol, physically he may be completely helpless, and on a personal level he may be out of reach of even his closest friends, but in Afrika's vision a person is more than the sum of his parts. These last lines suggest that not only the political persona, but also the realms of identity which we see as "personal" and even physical, may, in some way, be a mask, a façade behind which we hide a deeper, unfathomable and ultimately untouchable "self", a self which lies beyond all social ties, whether political or personal.

It is this holistic, in some sense spiritual, view of mankind which makes Afrika's poetry liberating in the truest sense of the word: even in the most extreme of circumstances his characters are never reduced to mere puppets trapped in a political game but remain awesomely and mysteriously human, so that one is reminded of what Seamus Heaney calls "the great paradox of poetry":

Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they... [poetry and the imaginative arts]... are practically useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense it is unlimited. (107)

It is precisely because Tatamkhulu Afrika's poetry "stakes out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life" that he manages to overcome one of the other major problems associated with the whole idea of "political poetry". As we have seen above in our discussion of the poem "The Squaring", there seem to be certain zones of reality that exist outside the power of speech, *beyond* words. Certain events and experiences seem almost too extreme, too devastating and upsetting to be a suitable subject for art – there are things before which the imagination seems to hesitate, to falter. This century has thus seen poets struggling, mostly without too much success, to find a new language, new images and new techniques in order to deal with these dark and disturbing, yet ever increasing areas of life – thwarted, compromised or commanded by politics.

After the second world war, for instance, poets in Europe were confronted with the almost impossible dilemma of trying to deal with the horror of the Holocaust in a creative manner, and their sense of helplessness in the face of the sheer scale, the unbelievable *enormity* of this atrocity is clear from the fact that, to this day, so little poetry of note has been written on this subject. In South Africa, poets were confronted with what Ndebele calls “the spectacular” – *their* task was to find ways of dealing with the “brazen, exhibitionist openness” of South African oppression:

Everything in South Africa has been mind-bogglingly spectacular: the monstrous war machine developed over the years; the random massive pass raids; mass shootings and killings; mass economic exploitation the ultimate symbol of which was the mining industry; the mass removals of people; the spate of draconian laws passed with the spectacle of parliamentary promulgations; the luxurious life-style of whites: servants, all encompassing privilege, swimming pools, and high commodity consumption; the sprawling monotony of architecture in African locations, which are the very picture of poverty and oppression. The symbols are all over; the quintessence of obscene social exhibitionism. (37)

In the face of such extreme and pervasive social injustice, it is hardly surprising that the imagination of many poets and writers did seem to hesitate, to falter: “[t]hinking [became] secondary to seeing, [s]ubtlety [became] secondary to obviousness” (Ndebele 43). In other words, many poets found it difficult to do more than merely reflect these unsubtle and crude images of oppression and suffering, with the unfortunate effect that many “protest poems” unwittingly reproduced the deficiencies of their time and place: instead of finding a new language to confront the system of evil they were fighting *creatively*, many poets fell back on an inhuman, anonymous language of power; instead of examining the *details* of individual and social life under oppression they focussed on the massive and obvious *symbols* of oppression, instead of interiority the focus was on exteriority, instead of analysis and emotion we find blind conviction and self-

righteousness.⁹ At its worst, a great deal of “protest poetry” was therefore filled with endless stereotypes, stirring, simplistic slogans, the uncritical glorification of past heroes and the unproblematic “normalisation” of violence and bloodshed. A kind of poetry, in other words, which ironically enough mirrored the values, language and aesthetics promulgated by the apartheid state:

The language of our most fervent liberatory poems was often no more than a facsimile of the language of its greatest enemy; linguistically speaking there was an exact moral equivalence... Their rhetoric was based as firmly on the shibboleths of Romantic nationalism – “blood”, honour, “soil” – as Afrikaner nationalism had long been. (Watson “*Rhetoric of Violence*” 48-49)

As we have seen in the previous chapters, Tatamkhulu Afrika’s poetry avoids the aesthetic of “the spectacular” by focussing on particular examples rather than on absolutes, on detailed personal “miniatures” rather than on massive generalizations. This does not mean, needless to say, that he ignores the glaring inequalities or downplays the extent of the social injustices in this country – after all, Afrika has admitted that he was prompted by “rage” to start writing: “I was genuinely infuriated by what was being done to the black people here... I was filled with fury” (Ferguson 27). What it does mean is that when he tackles these issues he focuses not on “spectacular” examples but on ordinary, everyday incidents and people, with the effect that his observations and criticisms are more nuanced, more complex and therefore all the more devastating.

In the poem “The Guest” (*Nine Lives* 38), for example, we find a fierce condemnation of those who continue their lives of privilege and wealth without a thought to those suffering people who share their country. Interestingly enough, the poem ignores all the blatant symbols of a wealth based on exploitation (the swimming pools, the luxury German cars, the holiday homes) to focus on that most unspectacular and most basic form of consumption: the act of eating. In the poem, he describes a meal with someone who has evidently never known hunger,

who eats with a “lissome, effortless ease” (21), unaware of the speaker’s perception that

Between us stretches
not linen but shame. (23-24)

The poem is remarkable for the way in which Afrika metaphorically transforms the simple act of eating into a ritual of bizarre, mindless cruelty – suggesting perhaps that in a country of such shocking inequality the rich are, metaphorically speaking, feasting on the flesh of the poor. And the imagery is all the more effective because Afrika does not rely on an “instant” symbol of exploitation (one overlaid with an immediately accessible meaning), but re-imagines a normal, everyday event in a manner that invites identification and therefore causes intense discomfort.

You spoon the salt blood of your soup,
flens the tender flesh of steak
from the troubling T-bone
absently crumple a finger
of blanched, sacramental bread,
palpate a grape’s
gelatinous eye. (25-31)

It is precisely because Afrika has the courage to re-imagine so many of the stock images of South African life that he avoids another aspect of the aesthetic of the “spectacular”: comforting, one-dimensional stereotypes. He thus avoids a reproduction of those over-familiar images of victimhood and tyranny one has come to know so well, what Ndebele calls

... the predictable drama between ruthless oppressors and their pitiful victims; ruthless policemen and their cowed, bewildered prisoners; brutal farmers and their exploited farm hands; cruel administrative officials in a horribly impersonal bureaucracy, and the bewildered residents of the township, victims of that bureaucracy; crowded trains and the terrible violence that goes on in them among the oppressed; and a variety of similar situations. (63)

We have seen that even the poorest and most marginalized are portrayed in Afrika's poetry as complex and multifaceted individuals – far from passively suffering they are clawing their way through a harsh and bitter world in human and ordinary ways. Similarly, there are no “cardboard cut-out” villains to be found in his poetry – he avoids the language of hate to portray instead even the most evil of people in a way that emphasises their humanity. The effect of such treatment, however, is not to absolve or explain their actions, but to create a portrait of evil that is more chilling, more unsettling, than a crude stereotype can ever be. The policeman he describes in the poem “Interrogator” (*Dark Rider* 72), for instance, is a different creature altogether from the faceless, senselessly evil “pig” of so much resistance literature. This man has a voice that is “not unkind” (12), hands that are “unexpectedly refined” (19), and a photograph of his wife “smiling... from the wall” (54). When he therefore shows himself to be capable of a calculated and yet almost casual, *easy* cruelty, the effect is chilling, nauseating:

His voice was low, remote:
he spoke an immaculate Afrikaans.
The steady gaze held no threat:
yet there was a stirring in
the small hairs of my neck,
and once he leaned across and,
without taking his eyes from mine, felt
the palm of my right hand.
“Hard hands”, he said,
“From the bicycle perhaps?”,
and then he bent the middle finger back
until I thought that it would break and screamed
at the sudden seizure by such pain. (23-35)

Popular culture has, to a large extent, begun to associate an air of menace with a certain sense of mystery and even glamour, probably because of the huge popularity of such Hollywood movies as *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Reservoir Dogs*. But Afrika writes from his own unglamorous and painful experience, and what we therefore find in a poem like the one quoted above is an overwhelming sense of the *ordinariness* of evil. A monster can be killed, caged, or even forgiven, we can shake our heads over the great “mystery” that is evil and then

calmly wash our hands in innocence. But the man in Afrika's poem is no monster; in fact, he is almost boringly "normal". There is little sense of a titillating sadism or an enjoyment of cruelty, one rather gets the idea that this is someone who might just be misguided enough to believe that he is doing his "duty". When this man therefore makes small talk while casually torturing the speaker, we are faced with some burningly uncomfortable questions. What do we mean when we brand someone as being "evil"? Can the perpetrators of "evil" ever be excused by the fact that they are acting within the "acceptable" methods and norms demanded by their community? And what does this imply about the moral position of the other members of such a community – people who do not commit such deeds themselves, but nevertheless (expressly or tacitly) condone such evil?

Like all responsible poetry, then, a poem such as this one asks questions rather than provide answers. Afrika is not so much telling us how to think and feel as challenging our set perceptions, and it is for this very reason that his poetry cannot be described as "propagandistic" in any sense – he neither tries to twist our arms by foisting some philosophy on us nor tries to seduce us through the beauty of his words into accepting certain political ideals. He thus avoids what is probably the most serious crime that poetry has been accused of in this century.

To quote Milan Kundera:

After 1948, through the years of Communist revolution in my native country, I saw the eminent role played by lyrical blindness in a time of Terror, which for me was *the period when the poet reigned along with the executioner...* I would think about Mayakovsky then, his genius was as indispensable to the Russian Revolution as Dzherzhinsky's police. Lyricism, lyricization, lyrical talk, lyrical enthusiasm are an integrating part of what is called the totalitarian world; that world is not the gulag as such; it's a gulag that has poems plastering its outside walls and people dancing before them. (157, my emphasis)

In the last century we have seen that artists can wield real power – especially those artists who use language in an almost magical way to persuade, inspire and influence others. With such power, of course, comes a great responsibility, the responsibility not to deceive people and not to seduce them, and especially not to camouflage inhuman ideas in robes of such beauty that even the best among us become confused, swept away by a tide of blinding, beautiful, misleading words. In Kundera’s native Czechoslovakia it was totalitarianism that was lyricized in the political poetry of the time; in South Africa, in contrast, it was the ideals of freedom, revolution and heroism. These ideals were, no doubt, necessary and even admirable in themselves, but, unfortunately, it too often happened that they were propagated in our poetry in an uncritical and unproblematic manner that “led to the prescriptions of solutions even before all the problems have been discussed and analysed” (Ndebele 67). In the following I shall therefore briefly discuss the way in which Tatamkhulu Afrika deals with these three ideals in his poetry. More specifically, I shall try to show that, because he is always so careful to deal with the specific rather than the abstract, his poetry never “lyricizes” political ideals without counting the human cost – in spite of the fact that both Afrika’s poetry and his life are a testament to his true political commitment, he is always careful not to become a “puppet with transplanted mind”, or a (48) “damn / fool talking machine” (96) (“Marxist” *Dark Rider* 43).

In his article “The Rhetoric of Violence”, Stephen Watson claims that South Africans have long been in love with violence: “The Left as well as the Right has made much use of a concept of ‘good’ torture and ‘bad’ torture, ‘good’ murder and ‘bad’ murder” (42). This, he argues, is also true of our poets, who (he believes) have contributed to the “normalisation” of violence in South Africa by using the rhetoric of violence – words like “blood”, “weapons” and “force” – during the most difficult time of the struggle without imagining a possible referent for them. This very serious accusation is, I believe, in many ways too generalized (one immediately thinks of a poet such as Serote who in his best poems simultaneously faces the way in which people were driven to the point where they

had to decide to kill, *and* do so in the face of an awareness of the degree of self-violation involved in taking life – even in “righteous violence” or a “just war”).¹⁰ It may also be unfair, as he does not seem to take into account the violence (both literal and figurative) against which this poetry was not only a reaction but also a defence and a weapon.

The issue, however, is probably too complex to be fully discussed here. For the purposes of this study, it is enough to note that in spite of Tatamkhulu Afrika’s background of political activism, his poetry can never be accused of idealising or normalising violence – because he is always so careful to humanize abstractions, his poetry explores what Doherty calls “the human consequences of both repression *and* resistance to repression” (2). Thus, while there are times when Afrika admits to the sheer joy of violent, powerful, resistance (“Hit Squad” *Dark Rider* 69), violence in his poems is usually portrayed as an overwhelmingly traumatic experience with long-lasting and harrowing consequences. In the poem “Sleepless” (*Maqabane* 89), for instance, the speaker confesses that he needs:

...a healing of hands,
a priest
to exorcise a beast. (15-17)

The longing is for a cleansing, for a restoration of innocence, a sense of peace after a life led too long among the excitement and the horror of violence. Now that the time for fighting has ceased, his past deeds come back to haunt him – the speaker is sleepless, haunted by a past he cannot forget, cannot deny, so that he is forced to relive the most traumatic experiences night after night:

Under the sheet,
my hand clasps
a stone, I smash
a window, set
a car alight,
trapped raven of my throat caws
in exultation, weeps
at the hating of my heart.
I scream defiance at the watchers, wink
away tear gas, draw
love that is strength from sweat-

slicked companionable flesh,
slap a white-
faced woman caught
in an angle of a wall,
turn away, remembering her eyes,
shaking hands shielding her breasts. (45-60)

The trauma described here is the kind experienced by an inherently peaceful man driven to uncharacteristically violent deeds by circumstances beyond his control. Importantly, the speaker does not deny that there was a real need for these actions, nor does he regret the violence as such. What frightens him is his own capacity for hatred, the part of him which found joy in such actions, “the beast” which he discovered “moving in [his]belly” (74- 75).¹¹

Tatamkhulu Afrika’s treatment of the whole issue of political “freedom” is equally complex. The end of the struggle, for example, is not viewed as an unambiguous victory alone; his focus is on the wholeness of the entire human experience and therefore some of his most moving and important political poetry deals with the painful and confusing nature of the *aftermath* of the struggle. Poems such as “Ennui” (*Nine Lives* 34), “Old Bus” (*Nine Lives* 36), and “The Veteran” (*Nine Lives* 42) all deal with the disorientation that occurred when the struggle collapsed into the day-to-day continuation of everyday life: with the way in which so many people were left isolated, forgotten, without a clear purpose. Moreover, because Afrika’s sympathy is always with the marginalized, the powerless, he is careful not to be blinded by an unfounded optimism about the future. He therefore casts what Kundera would call an “unillusioned eye” (158) on the “victors”, the newly powerful, and subjects his political compeers to as close an ethical scrutiny as he does to those they were opposing. Klopfer thus argues that:

[t]here is a sense [in Afrika’s poetry] that the struggle has been betrayed. The victors are not those who took to the streets in courageous defiance of batons and bullets. The heroes of the struggle, the ordinary people, have been forgotten. (“Poise” 89)

This may be so, but it does not mean that Afrika has lapsed into cynicism; in his poetry one still finds a deep and abiding belief that this country will one day belong to all its citizens.¹² It is probably more accurate to say that in the lines of his best poetry, Afrika is *still* fighting for freedom by asking the question which Ndebele identifies as the one necessary to “redeem” South African literature: “where is the struggle in South Africa *at the moment?*” (65). Afrika finds that struggle in the need to overcome the invisible wealth barrier which still keeps people “in their place” (“Nothing’s Changed”, *Maqabane* 33); in the need to fight a very real racism that still exists in this country (“The Laager” [*Maqabane* 101]; “Pas de Trois” [*Dark Rider* 65]); in the need to remember those who have sacrificed their lives for freedom only to be forgotten or discarded (“Walking Wounded” [*Maqabane* 63]; “They Never Knew [*Dark Rider* 65]); in the need to establish a more trusting and less violent society (“Girl Alone”, *Maqabane* 47) and, most of all, in the need to fight the poverty, suffering and exploitation that are still so prevalent in South African society.

Tatamkhulu Afrika, as we have seen, presents people as they are rather than as we want them to be and that means that the ideal of “heroism” is also very cautiously handled in his poetry. One of the main aims of “protest literature” was to inspire people, to “wake the sleeping heart and steel the timid spine” (to repeat Schwartzman’s quote above), and a great deal of this kind of writing was therefore peopled by heroes: people willing to sacrifice themselves regardless of the personal pain they might suffer, people who rise from the ashes like the phoenix rises: unbroken, unscathed, still whole.¹³ Such portrayals, though inspiring, were of course ultimately misleading: “it is humanly unrealistic to show a revolutionary hero... who has no inner doubts... [a]ll great revolutionaries... have had to grapple with fears, anxieties and doubts” (Ndebele 30). Once again, it is because Tatamkhulu Afrika focuses on specific, individual cases that we find a very different kind of “hero” in his poetry – his “heroes” are not idealized; if they are heroic it is because they are courageous in spite of being flawed, human

and vulnerable. And despite their courage they are not indestructible; like all human beings they too get hurt, become broken and burnt:

The phoenix rises, living, from the fire,
but not men: men rise from it
as dead as when they burned. (47-49)

This quote is from “The Detainee” (*Nine Lives* 48), which tells of a man who spent “three interminable years” (27) in detention without trial. On the surface this man remains a hero, capable of warm emotion, playfulness and joy, alive with energy and with an unbroken spirit:

You rose, embracing me, giving a great bellow of
rumbustious joy
God, I thought, how I have missed this man
the thundering, wild heart of him, the calloused palm,
heavy as a riven tree,
crashing down on my unsuspecting spine. (7-12)

But the superficial heartiness and strength hide a heartbreaking vulnerability. Heroes, like tortoises, might have hard, unbreakable shells, but underneath there is the same softness shared by all of us, and it is this softness, this sensitivity, that can become brutalized, violated, destroyed.

When I was little older than your son,
I saw a tortoise, wrapped in flame,
boiling in its shell.
Its head swung this way, that,
its mouth cawed soundlessly as it screamed.
So, as the evening aged and you talked on,
reliving for me what I had no right to know,
your voice grew softer till it was as dust on air,
and then it stopped and your head
swung this way, that, and soundlessly,
as did the tortoise in its shell,
you screamed. (34-45)

When one comes away from Afrika’s “political poetry”, it is this silent scream that stays with one, a scream of almost unbearable pain that says more about our country’s past than volumes of history books ever can. In a country like ours where so many people (mainly, of course, white people) lived comfortably

through the apartheid years, only to settle for a comfortable post-apartheid amnesia, this is *essential* poetry. Not because it is filled with accusations, or hatred, or anger, but because it re-claims a humanity from the lost years of our country, when for many that word was just an empty term, so

that our hearts may break
and our tears be unfrozen
and that the healing may at last begin.¹⁴

Endnotes:

1. From "Under Ben Bulben" (*Last Poems and Two Plays*, 1939).
2. As quoted in Cronin (10).
3. As quoted in Gordimer (5).
4. Of course, such criticism is not unique to the South African context. Milan Kundera, for instance, levels almost exactly the same kind of criticism against overtly "political" writers such as George Orwell (225).
5. See Schwartzman, for example: "The poems derive from an explicit commitment to transform the reality that they and their audiences inhabit. These are poems with explicit theses... They are tools for consciousness raising". (9)
6. See Mbulelo Mzamane, for instance, in this regard:

we talk as if every time a black South African writer picks up a pen he is protesting... This is the type of stereotyping into which I have actually seen some of my compatriots trying to fit... I attempt not to present my people as in any sense self-pitying, as though they were lachrymose all the time – mournful and so on. You may be surprised at how much zest for life black South Africans have: We laugh, we sing (perhaps you have heard of Miriam Makeba) – there is a great deal to celebrate among my people. It is this positive side of my people which I think is eternal and testifies to their indomitable spirit (40).

7. These are, of course, also the kind of issues which Albie Sachs, then a senior member of the ANC, raised in his seminal speech in 1990: "Preparing ourselves for Freedom". In regard to this whole issue in

general, it is probably important to mention that there were some very important exceptions – South African poets who refused to fit into what Mzamane called the “too small jacket” (40) of this narrow definition of protest poetry. After all, at heart “Black Consciousness poetry” was a collective, conscious and complex effort at re-invention, a journey of self-discovery and a re-imagining of old, stultifying and inadequate identities. (One thinks, for instance, of the careful way in which Serote in his early work examined township life in all its complexity to find a painful but necessary sense of belonging; the way in which Sepamla mocked and undermined official discourses in his poetry; and the “brothers” in Gwala’s “Getting off the Ride” who are not only victims but also canny survivors who “will bullshit...for a Rand”). In the 1980s and early 1990s (when some of the BC poets did slip into a more unreflective rhetoric of protest) poets such as Cronin and De Kok wrote “unauthoritative” poetry which in quite ordinary ways affirmed the humanity of people rather than their victimization, and in the voices of Afrika’s contemporaries, Motsapi and Rampolokeng (to name but two), one hears the freedom of poets who are bravely willing to say exactly what they think.

8. Afrika made these points in a letter to the literary journal *Contrast* in 1989 (quoted in Sole [“Bird’s heart” 26]).
9. Ndebele makes this point in great detail in his essay “Rediscovery of the Ordinary” in his collection of the same title (37 –57). Once again, it is probably important to note that in many ways his criticisms are perhaps too generalized – some of our best poets did, in fact, dig deeper under the surface of South African society than he is willing to admit.
10. See Jane Watts’s chapter on Serote in this regard in *Black Writers from South Africa*.
11. These are, of course, issues that gained great prominence within the TRC debate.
12. See, for instance, the strong ending of the poem “Dancing in my City” (*Dark Rider* 53).

13. See Chapman's introduction to his anthology *Soweto Poetry* in this regard.

He argues that:

Whereas early Soweto poetry had taken as its highest ideal that Western one of justice, the later poetry, especially that which has appeared since the events of 1976, has rediscovered the highest of African ideals: heroism. (22)

14. From Dennis Brutus's poem "Goree" (quoted in De Kock and Tromp 116).

“Sing of the homogeneity of men”: Reclaiming the idea of human value

Throughout this thesis I have tried to discuss Tatamkhulu Afrika's poetry in a way that steers clear of the more theoretical extremes of modern literary criticism. Partly, this was done in an attempt to avoid the sterility which an over-emphasis on the “-isms” of literary criticism can bring to the discussion of a literary text, and partly because, in my opinion, Tatamkhulu Afrika's work calls for a different *kind* of response. Afrika has stated that he wants his poetry to be read by ordinary people,¹ and from the lack of pretension as well as the accessible simplicity which characterize his best poems, it is clear that the poems look to these “ordinary people”, rather than to the academic establishment for a nod of approval. This does not mean that Afrika's work cannot bear the scrutiny of an academic analysis, but that, in many ways, the most honourable response to his poetry is on the level of feeling, of empathy and human responsiveness.

These are words, of course, which have become increasingly unpopular in the field of literary criticism, but, in South Africa at least, there have been some critics who have pleaded for a recognition of the necessity and importance of these values in literary texts. This is what De Kock and Tromp, for instance, have to say on this subject:

Coming as we do from a tradition of literary aesthetics in which “feeling” was consigned to a formula called “SIFT” (derived from I.A. Richards and Practical Criticism: Sense, Intuition, Feeling and Tone), the recovery of feeling as a serious value should not be underestimated. For it is more: a community of shared feeling, a place we can all call “home”. We hardly need add that one of the principal effects of apartheid was to cauterise such a shared context of human fellowship. (107)

As we have seen, Tatamkhulu Afrika's poetry displays a rich and surprising mix of values. There is anger and rage at social inequality, a reverence towards nature, a belief in the power and beauty of human love, an awareness of the fleeting nature of life and youth, a capacity for forgiveness and a belief in a higher power. But the overarching value, and one which encompasses all of these, is an unusual sensitivity and empathy towards others, an almost startling compassion towards people and a remarkable acceptance of even the weakest, the most desperate and reviled human beings. In our divided and confused country, with its overwhelming need to rehabilitate and re-imagine human identities, Afrika's poetry thus provides a generous but challenging aesthetic, one that allows us to participate in something like the "shared context of human fellowship" mentioned in the quotation above. It is generous because, without diminishing the difficult issue of "difference", it is based on a belief in our common humanity; challenging, because this common humanity is never idealized or sentimentalised, but stripped to the bone, naked, raw.

The poem "Wordless Song" (*Dark Rider* 21) provides a good example of what I mean by the above. It opens with the following lines:

They lie in the door's
dark recess:
just the two of them,
wrapped in shining
plastic sheets,
tightly paired.
He's leaning over her,
picking at
the head she yields.
I watch his hands:
seasoned as old wood
with the dirt of years,
they part with an odd tenderness
the tangled hairs,
stroke the scalp's
startling scars. (1-16)

This poem is astonishing, almost disorientating, because the tenderness of the tone and the odd lyricism of the lines are in such stark contrast to the harsh reality of what is described: the “plastic sheets” (5), the dirty hands, the “picking” (7) at the scarred scalp – probably for lice. Even in our post-apartheid democratic society, people like these South Africans (the poor, the homeless, the dirty, who have been “worn down by suffering to nothing more than themselves” [Schwartzman 20]) are still all too often seen as less than human, debased. What Afrika does in this poem is to look closely at such people while they are engaged in an action which many would find repulsive – animalistic even – and to find something moving and infinitely human there: an “odd tenderness” (13). In other words, where someone more prejudiced and insensitive – or perhaps just more squeamish – might see a picture uncomfortably reminiscent of two animals grooming each other, Afrika finds evidence of a tender and fragile human love which survives even in the toughest and most unlikely of circumstances, so that their wordless song of love can be compared to

angels’ gods’
earth’s and stars’
everything that twins
in spirit or in sense. (37-40)

This may sound, at first, like an almost ridiculous idealization, but that is simply not Afrika’s way: “when he writes about the poor, the dispossessed, he does so without sentimentality or false aggrandizement, for he is writing about those he intimately knows” (Shenfeld 10). The portrayal of these two people may have an enormous depth and sense of integrity but it is not really a celebration – Ken Barris is quite correct when he argues that “the right verb has to be found for Afrika’s presentation of personhood” (10). The speaker, then, finds an unexpected beauty here not because he closes his eyes to what is unpleasant but exactly because he does not look away, so that his gaze encompasses a fuller reality. Thus he does not forget that “...only yesterday they spat / like mating cats” (62-63), but at the same time this knowledge of the “dark / other side of their lives” (65-66)

does not allow him to dismiss what he sees before him now: a warm comfort, a deep trust and true sensual pleasure.

I watch his hands
cupping her head,
thumbs anchoring them
either side,
fingers walking, sensing
through the hairs,
cracking nits
with the long nails.
Once she grunts
as though he hurts,
but then stretches
out straight,
draws a long, shuddering sigh,
moves closer to him
with that languorous
slow undulance
that only lovers show,
and I know that I must go,
and do, with my own
long shudder
all the way down
my spine. (67-88)

Afrika challenges us to look where we would rather not, and what we find there is something completely unexpected: ourselves. In other words, he “builds the emotions of the reader into the poem” (to use Ndebele’s formulation [32]). The actions described here mirror our own longing for physical closeness and tenderness, and yet, because of the unusual context, the speaker’s ambiguous “shudder” (86) at the end of the poem is ours too. This shared humanity is not an easy one to claim, not exactly a lofty and beautiful “fellowship of man”. It is rather an acceptance of the fact that we share similarities – painfully raw vulnerabilities and needs – even with those we perceive as most threatening, most repulsive, most “other”.

It is this kind of identification with what is “other”, an identification based on shared *feeling*, that so few people in South Africa ever allow themselves to

experience and which many artists and poets have, in fact, come to see as an impossibility. Tatamkhulu Afrika is therefore a rather unusual modern poet, and not for this reason alone. In today's world, Afrika is almost an anomaly: an experienced, politically active, educated "man of the world", who is also deeply, intensely, religious. He is outspoken about his deep faith as a Muslim, and while some have argued that his religious belief weakens his poetry,² I believe that it in fact allows Tatamkhulu Afrika's work an "open space", a dimension of feeling and a certain rootedness denied to many modern poets.

In a world ruled by science and materialism, where death offers no redemption and life itself is but an accident of nature, it becomes more and more difficult to view people as something special, different in kind from something like cockroaches or even algae. Like a giant organism we spread over the planet, multiplying and destroying, and, every now and then, when a million or so of us die due to war or disease or some other calamity, we remain unmourned by the enormity of nature and space. God, of course, has been "dead" for over a century, but the horrors of the 20th century (the Holocaust, AIDS, world-wide genocide, ecological disasters, nuclear bombs – the list goes on) have deprived us of even our secular god: Progress. To quote Milosz again:

... the twentieth century is a purgatory in which the imagination must manage without the relief that satisfies one of the essential needs of the human heart, the need for protection. Existence appears ruled by necessity and chance, with no divine intervention; until recently God's hand used to bring help to pious rulers and to punish sinful rulers. But now even the idea of Progress, which was nothing but providence secularised, no longer provides any guarantee. Poets, always inclined by the nature of their art to distribute praise and blame, stand before a mechanism submitted to the actions of blind force and must suspend their yes and no in midair. (31)

This is the underlying world-view that marks our time and place, a world-view that has made the poetry of so many modern poets a study in all kinds of sarcasm and irony and bitterness and hopelessness.³

Tatamkhulu Afrika's religious belief, however, like Blake's before him, allows him to visualize people as more than mere ciphers trapped in a cold, objective and materialistic world, forever alienated from what is divine and lasting and beautiful. This does not mean (any more than in Blake's writing) that his poetry ever presents us with easy answers or glib formulas – in fact, Afrika admits that he often encounters “tremendous spiritual problems” in reconciling his religious beliefs with his need as a poet to “reflect the truth” (Ferguson 28) and that he has suffered some “unpopularity” in his “Muslim community” because he is seen as “too rebellious” (Wyngaard 68). What it does mean is that Afrika is free from that “mechanism” which would force him to “suspend his yes and no in midair” and that his poetry therefore has the kind of “breathing space” which comes with what Derek Walcott calls “an openness of belief” (262), a space which allows him to see the world and the people in it as miraculous, inexhaustible, somehow *whole*.

It may be because of this sense of wholeness that it is difficult to criticize Afrika's poetry for not conforming to rigid notions of “political correctness”. His portrayal of women, for instance, can hardly be said to be “feminist” in the usual sense, and yet it shows such an undeniable integrity, such a holistic truthfulness, that only those with a desperately narrow orthodoxy of correctness could describe it as sexist in any way. Afrika never speaks on behalf of women, but his poetry does not exclude them either. And, thankfully, the seductive or threatening stereotypes of patriarchy are few and far in between: women fill the pages of these volumes as lovers (“The Tear”, *Dark Rider* 117), wives (“The Labourer”, *Maqabane* 82) and victims (“Girl Alone”, *Dark Rider* 47), but also as comrades (“Small March”, *Dark Rider* 93), friends (“They Never Knew”, *Dark Rider* 65), enemies (“Spiders”, *Nine Lives* 26), and just about everything in between.

In the poem “Edie” (*Maqabane* 35), the speaker tells of his deep love for a woman, a “[c]asual char” (20) who cleans the “communal loos” (21) in a rundown apartment block. Edie is one of the marginalized people of our society; in spite of her obvious sensitivity and intelligence (55-59) and her almost desperate, resolute, cheerfulness (22-24), her life is one of mind-numbing drudgery, poverty and squalor. She is, however, far from an object of pity, in fact, the speaker finds her challenging, interesting, and undeniably sexually attractive:

There was a lilt to her,
a sauciness of the bum,
a recklessness of eyes that snapped
with indomitable aplomb. (25-29)

This description may be “saucy”, but it differs in kind from those found in “lads magazines” or pulpy bestsellers because it shows an appreciation of the whole person that goes far beyond the physical. Shenfeld argues correctly that “sex is part and parcel of [Afrika’s] earthiness and physical engagement with the world” (11), but it is a sexuality miles removed from the modern commercial exploitation of youth and beauty – for Afrika “sex underlies everything... even the adoration of God”.⁴ While Edie’s sexuality is therefore acknowledged and enjoyed by the speaker, she is hardly presented as a magazine cover ideal of objectified feminine beauty:

Even when she bent
over a bowl and her stocking-tops bit
into the matronly thighs,
it was hard to think of her as forty years old.
The backs of her knees
would seem so vulnerable then,
veins throbbing just under the skin,
flowered, not always very clean,
too short skirt rucked
up almost to the panty-hems,
her naturally frizzy hair,
straightened with some gel,
golliwogging all over her skull. (30-42)

The woman described here is very different from the usual object of devotion to be found in standard “love poetry”: like so many of the people in Afrika’s poetry

Edie too refuses to conform to stereotypical expectations. The tenderness we find in this portrait is based, not on a fantasy created in the mind of a smitten male poet, but on a raw and honest appreciation of Edie's humanity and vulnerability, and there is therefore little attempt to control or lay claim to the woman described through poetic idealization. The speaker, instead, allows himself to be touched by this woman while accepting her "otherness" (rather than destroying or denying it), and the effect is emotionally and sexually liberating.

Clenched fist of my heart,
opening, puffed
into flowers, flames:
voice in the deep blood crying Yes! (70-74)

When he therefore, on his first visit to her home, finds her in a drunken stupor in her squalid little room he does not reject or "chide" (105) her, as his love is not built on a fantasy of womanhood but on a true admiration and compassion for the real woman he has come to know. We are consequently not surprised to learn that his feelings for her remain strong even long after she is dead and buried – though unusual, their love story was a true one, in the same way that this poem is a "love poem" in the most genuine sense of the word.

As mentioned above, words like "feeling", "humanity", "belief" and even "love", have, as part of the discourse of liberal humanism, become deeply suspect in modern literary criticism – and perhaps with good reason. The main problem, it seems, lies not so much with the meaning of the words themselves, but with what these words can conceal, hide from view. From a western viewpoint (a notion, perhaps, in itself suspect), the main problem with the above-mentioned concepts – for a long time the mainstays of what was seen as "culture" – can be summed up in the following way:

The main reproach made to culture, a reproach at first too difficult to be formulated, then finally formulated, was that it maintained a network of meanings and symbols as a façade to hide the genocide underway [referring to the Holocaust]. By the same token, religion, philosophy, and art

became suspect as accomplices in deceiving man with lofty ideas, in order to veil the truth of existence. (Milosz 81)

In Africa, as in other parts of the so-called “third world”, this accusation has another dimension. Under colonialism (and its more intricately organized successor, apartheid), the magic words of liberal humanism (“civilization”, “humanity”, “feeling”, “culture”, etc.) were used to obscure the harsh realities of slavery, exploitation, and oppression, and had to be deconstructed, unmasked as mere forms of discourse, in order to expose a more truthful version of reality. Bennet and Royle summarize this argument in the following way:

... the invention of modern concepts of ‘human nature’, together with ideas about the universal nature of humanity and the human mind, occurred during ... ‘those particular violent centuries in the history of the world known as the era of Western colonization’. Critics such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha have argued that the Western discourse of colonialism is constituted by the other subject – by alterities of race, colour, ethnic origin. The Western constitution of human identity itself as universal or unchanging may be recognized as a historical construct constituted by the exclusion, marginalization and oppression of racial others. (201)

It is therefore probably understandable that there are those who believe that Tatamkhulu Afrika’s work is deeply flawed exactly *because* of his religious beliefs, his deeply moral perspective, and his humanistic values as discussed in this thesis. Frank Wilderson, for instance, argues as follows:

Tatamkhulu Afrika’s monotheism and, albeit hesitant, humanism hinder him, in ways which he may be unaware of, in the task of unleashing a glacial violence against the nationalist project, in favour of an ever expanding dialectical vision that a [sic] Maqabane (comrade) strives for... In my opinion, all he needs to be free of is his faith, Islam, and his debilitating humanism, then like Genet and Malquiades his poems will literally become the

abyss of chaos and oppression that inhabits the globe. (66)

Whether Tatamkhulu Afrika's poetry is really intended to "unleash a glacial violence against the nationalist project" or to "become the abyss of chaos and oppression that inhabits the globe" is, of course, debatable. But if one looks past the hyperbole, the basic argument expressed here needs to be addressed. Does Afrika's "traditionalism"⁵ – his humanity, his religious beliefs and his moral perspective – prevent him from truly subverting the South African status quo, from imaginatively unsettling and recasting comfortable, settled beliefs?

The best way to address such criticism, I believe, is through a close analysis of one of Tatamkhulu Afrika's strongest poems, "The Woman at the Till" (*Nine Lives* 21). I quote the poem in full:

The Woman at the Till

She had a plain, hard face,
A head thrust forward like a hawk's.
Impossible brass triangles
dangled from pierced ears,
improbable steel manacles
cluttered her thin arms.
Clearly, she had little love for the world:
She had learned, though,
that she would not win,
so she did not throw your change at you,
nor did she press it in your palm,
but placed it, sullenly,
on the counter in between.
She would wrap your purchase languidly,
yet fast enough to cut off a complaint,
and when she had her punch-up with the till,
it was an exercise in ferocity,
delicately restrained.
She was what we call "maboer",
a low white trash,
AWB most probably,
slouching barefoot in Boksburg or Mayfair West.
I did not feel any particular hate for her,

perhaps because I was what
she would call a low black trash,
which made us quits.
And then I noticed that
she did not look at or thank
anyone, black or white,
and such an indiscriminating unsociability
won for her my respect!
But then one day a brazen clash
of colours drew my eyes
from their customary casting down,
the ritual bartering of cash for cloth,
the careful I-do-not-see-you stale pretence –
She had bought herself a brand-new blouse,
a rioting of palms and psychedelic birds,
a raw, extravagant, revolutionary thing,
as African as I.
I exclaimed in wonderment I could not hold in –
“What?” she barked,
looking at my hands.
“I said your blouse is beautiful.”
For the first time ever she looked into
my eyes, and time stood still:
her universe turned on an axis thin as a pin.
Then a strange and lovely tenderness touched her mouth,
a faint blush tinged her dead-white skin:
“Thank you”, she said, and smiled.

A superficial reading may conclude that this poem merely endorses one of the more inane fictions of the so-called “rainbow nation”: that we are all equal members of an African nation in spite of race, class or gender. But a closer analysis forces us to re-assess this simplistic conclusion and to accept that the “moral” of this story is far more radical. Thus, in the first half of the poem we find a description of a working-class woman which is almost shockingly unkind – subverting both the foundational fictions of traditional Marxism (of a “brotherhood” based on class) *and* liberal humanism (of the dignity and worth of the individual). The woman is described as “thin” (6), “plain” (1) and “hard” (1), and while the “steel manacles” (5) on her arms do suggest some kind of working-class bondage, there is little sympathy in the description. Her small private revolt against her situation speaks of pettiness rather than courage, and while the

narrator claims to understand the reason for her lack of “love for the world” (7), there is real contempt in his description of her as “ “maboer” / a low white trash, ... slouching barefoot in Boksburg or Mayfair West” (19-22).

It is the kind of description that almost relishes its own political incorrectness. Instead of a class-based solidarity there is ridicule, instead of a liberal attempt at respecting “the other” there is contempt, instead of a feminist neutrality towards her appearance, her unattractiveness is noted with a terrible clarity. This is, in other words, far removed from the platitudes of that kind of humanist discourse which would see South Africans living together in a state of mutual understanding and respect, and far closer to the suspicious, distrustful and fractured reality of everyday South African life. The “we” in line 19 is an especially discomfiting touch. Is the reader included in this “we” (i.e. implicated in this kind of racist, classist name-calling), or is the word “we” meant to exclude the reader (thereby further underlining the divisions in our society)? The word “particular” in line 23 is equally disturbing, as it seems to suggest that some kind of “generalized” hatred between South Africans of different races can simply be assumed as a given. There is moreover an almost teasing but disconcerting light-heartedness to these lines (“which made us quits” [26]), as well as an irreverent sense of irony, which further unsettles any easy moralistic position.

The turning point of the poem begins with the words “And then...” in line 27. The tone of the next few lines is of particular interest. It is almost as if the speaker is *amused* by the peculiarities of his own value system, the exclamation mark at the end of line 31 in particular showing an awareness of the way in which the perversities of South African politics have skewed human relationships. (Rudeness and disrespect are acceptable as long as they are colour blind!) But it is with the introduction of the “raw, extravagant, revolutionary” (39) blouse in the next few lines that Afrika really surprises our expectations. This piece of clothing – such light-years removed from what is usually perceived as being “in good taste” – speaks to the narrator of a certain hidden energy, vitality, and exuberant

rebelliousness, and allows the speaker to look past his own prejudices to the person behind the stereotype, to see a “strange and lovely tenderness” (48) beneath the grim exterior. The poem ends on a tentative but hopeful note, imagining as it does the fragile possibilities alive under the harsh surface of South African society. But it never denies the real differences of race, class and gender, the entrenched stereotypes, or the difficulty of bridging these social divides. The force of this poem is therefore both “traditionalist” *and* deeply “radical” – so much so, in fact, that these very categories begin to seem artificial and unreliable.

Tatamkhulu Afrika received his name from his Umkhonto we Sizwe comrades during his years of political activism. Although it is therefore not his “real” name, I have used it throughout this study as it is the name under which he writes his poetry and, according to him, “the only name that means anything to me”.⁶ When reading his poetry, one also realises that there is another reason why this name is marvellously fitting and somehow “right”. Before the somewhat ridiculous and deeply superficial idea of the superiority of “youth culture” swept our country and the world, old age was seen as a time of reflection, of wisdom and of experience. It is these qualities that Afrika brings to his poetry, together with the authority of someone who does not fear categorisation because, as the old man of Africa, he has lived enough to know that in the end it is only belief, compassion and our shared humanity – in all its imperfection, its rawness and its nakedness – that bring a glimmer of hope to this dark, dark world.

Endnotes:

1. See Berold (40).
2. See quoted extract below (9).
3. Milosz discusses this issue more thoroughly (from an European point of view) in his chapter “The Lessons of Biology” (39-59).

4. As quoted in Shenfeld (11). The full quotation is as follows: “I think sex is totally misunderstood. It underlies everything, even the adoration of God”.
5. According to Klopper, Chapman defines traditionalism as “a poetic practice that upholds the primacy of grammatical syntax and organic structure, and that embodies a humanistic value system” (Review: *Dark Rider* 61).
6. See Berold (38).

Conclusion

Over the course of the twentieth century, the notion of literary value as an inviolable essence has disintegrated. Critics have explored the ways in which literary appreciation is bound up with questions of class, economics, education, race, and sexual and gender difference, with the effect that our view of the impersonal and autonomous “realm of the aesthetic” has been irrevocably complicated. To illustrate this point, Bennet and Royle point out how critical vocabularies have changed over time:

In the eighteenth century, the vocabulary of value included ideas of proportion, probability and propriety; the Romantics developed a vocabulary of the sublime, imagination and originality; while nearer to our time, the New Critics valued complexity, paradox, irony and tension in poems, and postmodern critics valorized disjunction, fragmentation, heteroglossia, aporia, decentring. (480)

Throughout this thesis, I have been explicit and candid about my own personal appreciation of Tatamkhulu Afrika’s work, partly because I believe the whole idea of critical “objectivity” in itself to be “ideological” (that is, hopelessly culturally, ethnically and historically specific). In the first chapter I thus praised his eye for detail, his cultural sense of belonging and his groundedness in his local reality; in the second chapter I admired the way in which his poetry combines the public and private spheres of reality to avoid the alienation and elitism that poetry is so often accused of; in the third chapter I tried to show how his political poetry manages at the same time to be aesthetically pleasing, emotionally satisfying and intellectually challenging; and in the last chapter I admired his moral perspective and humane values. The reason why I have repeatedly employed terms of value in relation to Afrika’s work is, firstly, because I believe that – even if one does accept the definition (or even existence) of literary value to be contentious, unstable and debatable – the *force* of the literary cannot be denied, and secondly because I believe that the “primary aim of critical discourse, the impulse for talking about books, is to persuade someone else to appreciate what the critic finds valuable about the literary text” (Bennet and Royle 48).

I hope that in this thesis I have made it clear what I find valuable about Tatamkhulu Afrika's texts: his mastery of language and form, his rigorous intellectual exploration of both "personal" and "private" issues, his sensitivity and generosity and his careful observations. Above all, Afrika's poetry (as Heaney said of Derek Walcott's work)¹ is "awash with love" – a love of people and places and language and God, which makes it clear why Hopkins believed that "feeling, and in particular love, is the great power and spring of verse". In this country, with its "scarce resources and narrow tolerances" (to quote Michael Chapman [*Literatures* 344]), where so many people have long given up on any love for the land or each other, I cannot but believe that such poetry is "valuable", that it has a force and an unusual power and that in the years to come people will return to it again and again as a common, shared and generous resource.

Endnotes:

1. Heaney 27. The Hopkins quotation is from the same page.

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